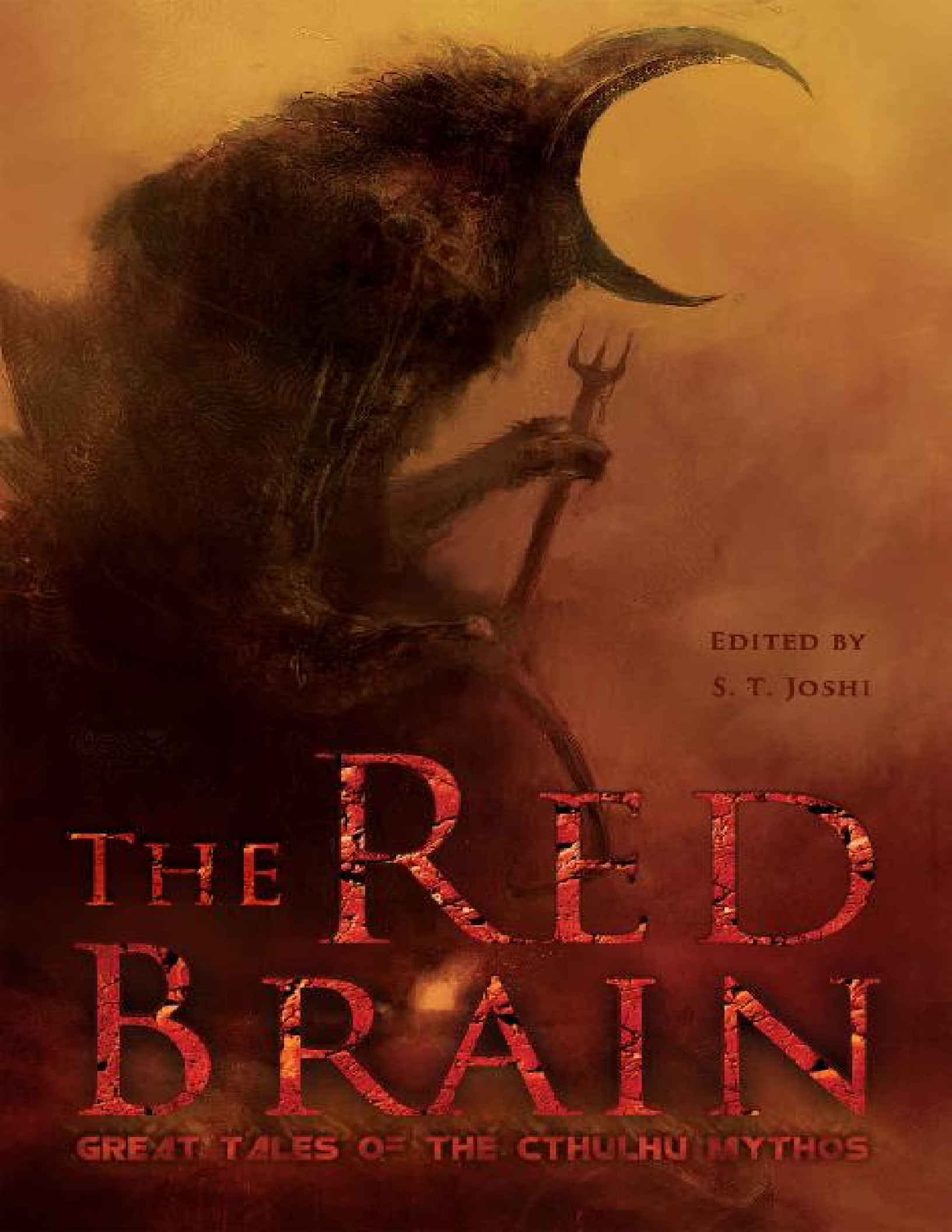

Edited by
S. T. Joshi

The Red Brain

Great Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos

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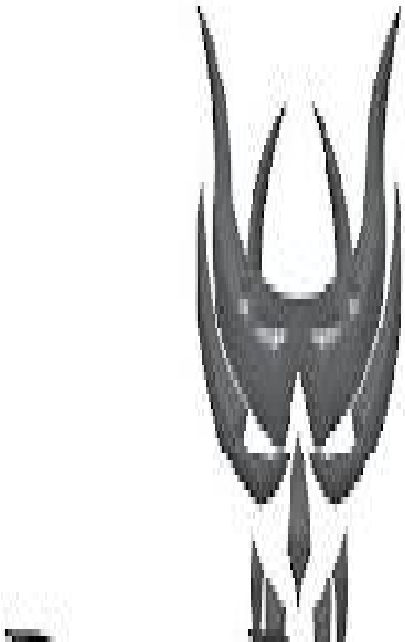

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INTRODUCTION

S. T. Joshi

As our understanding of H. P. Lovecraft and his circle—a circle that includes both the friends and colleagues he was directly in touch with and the hundreds of authors who have found inspiration in his life and work—we become increasingly aware that the Cthulhu Mythos was a collaborative enterprise on an unprecedented scale. This is not to say that Lovecraft's own stories embodying his pseudo-mythology are not to be studied in their own right, especially for what they can reveal about the philosophical vision he wished to disseminate by means of weird fiction; but there is no denying that the Cthulhu Mythos has come to be a "shared-world" concept that writers of widely differing temperaments can utilize to express their own aesthetic sensibilities. It is precisely because Lovecraft's own tales—whether they explicitly employ his pseudo-mythology or not—are so inexhaustibly rich and diverse that they can appeal to an incredibly diverse cadre of readers, writers, critics, and filmmakers.

A large part of that appeal rests in the figure of Lovecraft himself, who has become an icon of popular culture. The conventional portrait of this gaunt, lantern-jawed writer from Providence, Rhode Island—who wrote at night and slept during the day; who was inordinately fond of cats and ice cream; and who thought of himself as an eighteenth-century gentleman unwillingly placed in a twentieth century he abhorred—is in many ways an inaccurate caricature, but it has fueled readers' fascination with the literary creations engendered by such a distinctive personality. There is considerable evidence that Lovecraft himself cultivated this persona, as evidenced by what appears to be the earliest parody of his work—"Falco Ossifracus: By Mr. Goodguile" (1921), by Edith Miniter. This brief squib, appearing only two years after Lovecraft's own stories began appearing in the amateur press, is an exquisite parody of both "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and of Lovecraft himself, who is manifestly the first-person narrator of the story. Lovecraft's penchant for "big words" is delightfully skewered in such sentences as "I am really sorry to have to ask you to absquatulate." Edith Minter (1869–1934) was a longtime amateur

writer who also published one novel, *Our Natupski Neighbors* (1916), with the leadng New York publisher Henry Holt; and her meetings with Lovecraft in the Boston area beginning in 1920 no doubt inspired this affectionate parody.

As Lovecraft migrated from the world of amateur journalism into professional publication, especially after the founding of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1923, he came into contact with an ever-widening group of writers and devotees of weird fiction. Clark Ashton Smith—then already an established poet—was the first, and Lovecraft wrote what can only be called a fan letter to Smith in 1922 when some friends gave him Smith's superb early volumes of cosmic poetry. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei —later the founders of Arkham House, the publishing company established to preserve Lovecraft's works in hardcover—emerged on his horizon in 1926. Lovecraft had persuaded *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright to accept "The Red Brain" after its initial rejection, and Wandrei later returned the favor by urging Wright to reconsider his rejection of Lovecraft's seminal story "The Call of Cthulhu," which introduced the Mythos as we know it. Wandrei's story, although not without the flaws inherent in its composition by a teenager, is nonetheless a spectacular example of the cosmicism that is at the heart of Lovecraft's own work.

Smith took to writing fantasy and weird fiction in great quantity in the late 1920s, chiefly impelled by the need to earn an income to support his increasingly ailing parents. The result was an incredible array of about 130 stories written over a period of only seven years, a far greater output of fiction than Lovecraft generated over his entire lifetime. It may be true that Smith sometimes wrote hastily, and at other times was prepared to modify his stories at the behest of editors in a way that Lovecraft resisted; but he nonetheless produced a great many tales that embody his own desire to be a pure *fantaisiste* in contrast to Lovecraft's meticulous "prose realism." Smith rarely imitated Lovecraft directly, and when he did so (as in the well-known story "The Return of the Sorcerer"), the result was not always successful. Lovecraftian elements enter more interestingly in several stories that can in no way be termed simple pastiches, and "The Beast of Averoigne" (1933) is one of them. Smith himself stated that the story "contain[s] suggestions drawn from the Lovecraftian cosmos." Indeed, it proves to be a sly imitation of "The Dunwich Horror."

In the three decades following Lovecraft's death in 1937, the dissemination of his work rested largely in the not entirely capable hands of August Derleth, who certainly did yeoman's work in rescuing Lovecraft's work from the oblivion of the pulp magazines (although his editions were riddled with typographical and textual errors), but who brought discredit upon both Lovecraft and himself by writing unimaginative and overly schematic tales that robbed the Cthulhu Mythos of its stores of cosmic mystery. Derleth also felt obliged to protect Lovecraft's reputation by maintaining strict control over who could or could not write Mythos stories. One of the victims of his zeal was C. Hall Thompson (1923–1991), who actually wrote much better Mythos stories than Derleth himself. Thompson's masterwork is "Spawn of the Green Abyss" (*Weird Tales*, November 1946), a richly textured novella that draws upon "The Shadow over Innsmouth" and other tales in a distinctive manner. (This story can be found in this volume's predecessor, *A Mountain Walked: Great Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*.) Thompson followed it up with "The Will of Claude Ashur" (*Weird Tales*, July 1947), an ingenious riff on Lovecraft's "The Thing on the Doorstep" in that it portrays the effects of mind-exchange in the first person, as the protagonist tells us exactly what it is like to be exiled from his own body.

By the 1960s a new band of Lovecraftian writers was emerging, led by the young Ramsey Campbell (b. 1946). Campbell's early volume of Mythos stories, *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Less Welcome Tenants* (1964), was published when he was only eighteen, and it embodies the crudeness and overly derivative plots and language to be expected of a teenager, however precocious. Campbell has gone on, in the subsequent five decades, to be perhaps the most distinguished writer of weird fiction in literary history. His deep and sympathetic reading of Lovecraft cause elements from the Providence writer's corpus to crop up in unexpected places, not least of which is "The Pattern" (1976), which not only utilizes the well-known motif of the "forbidden book" but also Lovecraftian cosmicism in a highly unusual direction. When we remember that Lovecraft, in "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction" (1933), wrote that "*Conflict with time* seems to me the most potent and fruitful theme in all human expression," we realize how well "The Pattern" reflects a Lovecraftian orientation.

In recent decades, the entirety of Lovecraft's fictional work—not just those dozen or stories that explicitly embody Mythos trappings—has been

used as the springboard for imaginative ruminations. Thomas Ligotti (b. 1953), one of the most dynamic writers in weird fiction today, has flatly declared that he appreciates Lovecraft's earlier, less scientifically weighted tales over his later novellas, and "The Sect of the Idiot" (1988)—influenced chiefly by "The Music of Erich Zann" and "The Festival"—is a notable example of how Ligotti can draw upon those early tales in expressing his own vision. Brian McNaughton (1935–2004) created something of a revolution in his volume *The Throne of Bones* (1997), as it focused on Lovecraft's utilization of ghouls in such tales as "Pickman's Model" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. "Meryphillia" brilliantly teases out the latent sexuality in Lovecraft's ghoul concept while also finding inspiration in how ghouls can flit between the world of reality and the world of dream. One of the leading contemporary Lovecraftian writers, W. H. Pugmire (b. 1951), similarly draws upon ghouls—as well as the enigmatic figure of Richard Upton Pickman—in "Pickman's Lazarus."

Caitlín R. Kiernan (b. 1964) takes a different tack in "The Peddler's Tale; or, Isobel's Revenge," one of the few successful attempts to draw upon Lovecraft's early dreamland fantasies modeled on the work of Lord Dunsany. The story is quite a bit darker than most of Lovecraft's Dunsany pastiches—and no one could say of this tale that it is a mere pastiche.

The essence of Lovecraftian fiction is the threat of invasion from entities from "outside"—and the psychological impact they have on a human race keenly aware of its fragility and transience in a boundless cosmos. These elements are the focus of Jonathan Thomas's "Integrity" and Mark Samuels's "The Crimson Fog." Thomas, a native of Lovecraft's Providence, sets the tale in that ancient city—a city now undergoing a renaissance by the infusion of wealth and sophistication from the world of technological innovation. Thomas's compelling novella—actually written in the late 1970s as part of his master's thesis at Brown University—richly encapsulates the idea of "monsters in our midst" in a narrative that fuses Lovecraftian terror with action-packed thriller pacing. "The Crimson Fog" does something similar, even though it is set in a remote province in China. As for Ray Garton's "Misanthrope," it too focuses on alien invasion—but in a uniquely personal way that emphasizes Lovecraft's low regard for humanity's ability deal with the unthinkable.

Lovecraft's own literary work is alive and well, published in countless editions and translated into more than thirty languages worldwide. It can

also be said that neo-Lovecraftian fiction is thriving, if the dynamic work of both the older and the more contemporary writers in this volume is any gauge. No writer in this field—and perhaps in any field—has been the focus of such a diverse array of creative inspiration, and it is safe to say that we will hear echoes of Lovecraftian themes, motifs, and imagery for many decades to come.

– S. T. Joshi

FALCO OSSIFRACUS: BY MR. GOODGUILE

Edith Miniter

Any form of inquisition into the meaning of this will be fruitless. Favour me, an you will, with eternal confinement in a gaol, and everything that I now relate will be repeated with perfect candour.

Again I say I do not know anything at all about it, which is probably why I am making it the subject of this narrative. It is true that I have been for eighteen years his closest friend and we had been seen by reputable witnesses near Greenwood, N.Y., Sleepy Hollow by the Hudson, Mt. Auburn, Cambridge, Mass., and Grant's Tomb, Manhattan, but that we possessed tastes mutually morbid or a predilection for graveyards I must strenuously deny.

I seem to remember a weird evening in November. The place was, of course, a cemetery; over the fence peered an inquisitive, waning, crescent moon, and on the fence a vulture and his vulturine, a raven and a couple of cormorants remained couchant. Behind the wall I discerned the loud moan of several man-eating sharks, from which I augured that the sea was not above a league distant. A few skulls and crossbones lay in the foreground, while coffinplates, shreds of shrouds, and mattocks which I instinctively knew appertained to gravediggers, scattered around loosely, completed the remarkable scene.

I had, for some time, missed my companion, but as he was most frequently absent when we were together I thought little of the occurrence. Indeed, the next moment, my attention was arrested by the hurried passing of a completely articulated skeleton, holding its nose, from whence the bright blue blood of a Colonial governor streamed. And this was rather unique, because it *had no nose!*

Meaning to employ a phraseology which my readers will at once recognize as the common and natural expression of frequenters of tombs, "How's his nibs?" I inquired. Unfortunately a slight nervousness changed the "n" to "r", and the offended object disappeared without replying. I succeeded better, however, with the next bag o' bones, which came forth

applying a skeleton hand to the base of a spinal column and groaning frightfully, which was the more peculiar, as it had neither lungs nor windpipe.

"Your pal," came the response, "Iacchus Smithsonia," the name was originally John Smith, but it is always my will that my friends bear a name of my choosing and as cumbersome a one as possible, "is cleaning out Tomb 268."

It was indeed so. In the exact centre of the abode of corruption stood the self-elected subsidiary of Perpetual Care. His shrunken eye sockets, his dropped jaw, as well as a practically hairless cranium, proclaimed at one sight a youth who at fifteen dwelt far from normalcy, and the impression gained rather than lost by the pennies which, in accordance with a characteristic freak, he invariably wore over his flashing organs of sight. Alone he stood, brandishing the thigh bone of a remote ancestor. I say alone, for the pile of unassorted bones in the corner could hardly be called company, nor yet the half dozen grinning wraiths that floated about in the noisome atmosphere of the sepulchre.

"I am really sorry to have to ask you to absquatulate," he said, employing the choice diction which is so peculiar to we of the educated aristocracy, "but this ain't no place for a feller with cold feet."

As he spoke he pleasantly indicated a ladder dripping with ichor, whatever that is, and bordered by encrustations of nitre. I most wish now I'd made this a poem. As I was unable, through horror, to start at the moment, he went on, "Make yourself scarce, cut sticks, fly the coop, go way back and sit down, twenty-three for you, advance to the rear, vamoose!" All of which, uttered in the mellifluous tones of unperturbration for which my friend was famed, having no effect on my shattering nerves he added, politely,

"Good god, Goodguile, get out or I will kick you out!"

At the same time he employed a gesture which in a flash made plain to my understanding the cause for the flight of the second fleeing skeleton. After that ensued comparative silence. Indeed, I know not how many interminable aeons I wandered stupefied through cenotaphs, slabs, mausoleums, urns, icy hands and marble hearts. I do know that I narrowly escaped being bilked of breakfast at my boarding house. The hours are 7 to 8.45 weekdays, and this was of a Tuesday, but not the one the man died of —I strongly desire to obviate any monotony of analogy in this tale.

To my absolute amazement Iacchus was at once discernible as not present. His glass was turned down, as Omar Khayyam recommended, and his Sunday-clean napkin remained folded in its ring as he had placed it the previous evening, cranberry sauce stain outward.

Probably I showed trepidation. I know a few knives and spoons clattered to the floor, a plate shattered the window as it passed en route to the area-way, and my once full cup of coffee flooded the table cloth. My nerves are generally well in hand, I am able to remain calm in the face of any number of ghosts, nor is the miasmal gas of disinterment in the least displeasing to my olfactory organs, but I must admit that seeing my friend's absence, with the odor of Ancient Greece, possibly from frying potatoes, was too much.

Just as I lapsed into unconsciousness the landlady's raucous voice issued as from a necrophagus shadow. And this is what it said:

"You fool, he's got indigestion from a supper of Grilled Bones!"

THE RED BRAIN

Donald Wandrei

One by one the pale stars in the sky overhead had twinkled fainter and gone out. One by one those lights flaming whitely with their clear, cold flame had dimmed and darkened. One by one they had vanished forever, and in their places had come patches of ink that blotted out immense areas of a sky once luminous with hordes of brightly shining stars.

Years had passed; centuries had fled backward; the accumulating thousands had turned into millions, and they, too, had faded into the oblivion of eternity. The Earth had disappeared. The sun had cooled and hardened, and had dissolved into the dust of its grave. The solar system and innumerable other systems had broken up and vanished, and their fragments had swelled the clouds of dust which were engulfing the entire universe. In the billions of years which had passed, sweeping everything on toward the gathering doom, the huge bodies, once countless, that had dotted the sky and hurtled through unmeasurable immensities of space had lessened in number and disintegrated until the black pall of the sky was broken only at rare intervals by dim spots of light—light ever growing paler and darker.

No one knew when the dust had begun to gather, but far back in the forgotten dawn of time the dead worlds, in their ceaseless wanderings, had become smaller and had slowly broken up. What happened to them, no one knew or cared, for there was then none to know or care. The worlds had vanished, unremembered and unmourned.

Those were the nuclei of the dust. Those were the progenitors of the universal dissolution which now approached its completion. Those were the stars which had first burned out, died, and wasted away in myriads of atoms. Those were the mushroom growths which had first passed into nothingness in a puff of dust.

Slowly the faint wisps had gathered into clouds, the clouds into seas, and the seas into monstrous oceans of gently heaving dust, dust that drifted from dead and dying worlds, from interstellar collisions of plunging stars, from rushing meteors and streaming comets which madly flamed from the void and hurtled into the abyss.

The dust had spread and spread. The dim luminosity of the heavens had become fainter as great blots of black appeared far in the outer depths of space. In all the millions and billions and trillions of years that had fled into the past, the cosmic dust had been gathering, and the starry horde had been dwindling. There was a time when the universe consisted of hundreds of millions of stars, planets, and suns; but they were ephemeral as life or dreams, and like life or dreams they faded and vanished, one by one.

The smaller worlds were obliterated first, then the larger, and so in ever-ascending steps to the unchecked giants which roared their fury and blazed their whiteness through the conquering dust and the realms of night. Never did the Cosmic Dust cease its hellish and relentless war on the universe; it choked the little aerolites; it swallowed the helpless satellites; it swirled around the leaping comets that rocketed from one black end of the universe to the other, flaming their trailing splendor, tearing paths of wild adventure through horizonless infinitudes the dust already ruled; it clawed at the planets and sucked their very being; it washed, hateful and brooding, about the monarchs and plucked at their lands and deserts.

Thicker, thicker, always thicker grew the Cosmic Dust, until the giants no longer could watch each other's gyres far across the void. Instead, they thundered through the waste, lonely, despairing, and lost. In solitary grandeur they burned their brilliant beauty. In solitary majesty they waited for their doom. In solitary defeat, kings to the last, they succumbed to the dust. And in solitary death they disappeared.

Of all the stars in all the countless host that once had spotted the heavens, there remained only Antares. Antares, immensest of the stars, alone was left, the last body in the universe, inhabited by the last race ever to have consciousness, ever to live. That race, in hopeless compassion, had watched the darkening skies and had counted with miserly care the stars which resisted. Every one that twinkled out wrenched their hearts; every one that ceased to struggle and was swallowed by the tides of dust added a new strain to the national anthem, that indescribable melody, that infinitely somber paean of doom which tolled a solemn harmony in every heart of the dying race. The dwellers had built a great crystal dome around their world in order to keep out the dust and to keep in the atmosphere, and under this dome the watchers kept their silent sentinel. The shadows had swept in faster and faster from the farther realms of darkness, engulfing more rapidly the last of the stars. The astronomers' task had become easier, but the

saddest on Antares: that of watching the universe die, of watching Death and Oblivion spread a pall of blackness over all that was, all that would be.

The last star, Mira, second only to Antares, had shone frostily pale, twinkled more darkly—and vanished. There was nothing in all Space except an illimitable expanse of dust that stretched on and on in every direction; only this, and Antares. No longer did the astronomers watch the heavens to glimpse again that dying star before it succumbed. No longer did they scan the upper reaches—everywhere swirled the dust, enshrouding Space with a choking blackness. Once there had been sown through the abyss a multitude of morbidly beautiful stars, whitely shining, wan—now there was none. Once there had been light in the sky—now there was none. Once there had been a dim phosphorescence in the vault—now it was a heavy-hanging pall of ebony, a rayless realm of gloom, a smothering thing of blackness eternal and infinite.

"We meet again in this Hall of the Mist, not in the hope that a remedy has been found, but that we find how best it is fitting that we die. We meet, not in the vain hope that we may control the dust, but in the hope that we may triumph even as we are obliterated. We cannot win the struggle, save in meeting our death heroically."

The speaker paused. All around him towered a hall of Space rampant. Far above spread a vague roof whose flowing sides melted into the lost and dreamy distances, a roof supported by unseen walls and by the mighty pillars which rolled upward at long intervals from the smoothly marbled floor. A faint haze seemed always to be hanging in the air because of the measureless lengths of that architectural colossus. Like a boundless plain, the expanse of the floor swept forever onward with a dull-gleaming whiteness. Dim in the distance, the speaker reclined on a metal dais raised above the sea of beings in front of him. But he was not, in reality, a speaker, nor was he a being such as those which had inhabited the world called Earth.

Evolution, because of the unusual conditions on Antares, had proceeded along lines utterly different from those followed on the various bodies which had dotted the heavens when the deep was sprinkled with stars in the years now gone. Antares was the hugest sun that had leaped from the primeval chaos. When it cooled, it cooled far more slowly than the others, and when life once began it was assured of an existence not of thousands, not of millions, but of billions of years.

That life, when it began, had passed from the simple forms to the age of land juggernauts, and so by steps on and on up the scale. The civilizations of other worlds had reached their apex and the worlds themselves become cold and lifeless at the time when the mighty civilization of Antares was beginning.

The star, because of discords arising from its enormous population, had then passed through a period of warfare until such terrific and fearful scourges of destruction were produced that in the Two Days War seven billion of the eight and one-half billion inhabitants were slaughtered. Those two days of carnage, followed by pestilential diseases which carried off three-fourths of the remaining inhabitants, ended war for eons.

From then on, the golden age began. The minds of the people of Antares became bigger and bigger, their bodies proportionately smaller, until the cycle eventually was completed. Every being in front of the speaker was a monstrous heap of black viscidity, each mass an enormous brain, a sexless thing that lived for Thought. Long ago it had been discovered that life could be created artificially in tissue formed in the laboratories of the chemists. Sex was thus destroyed, and the inhabitants no longer spent their time in taking care of families. Nearly all the countless hours that were saved were put into scientific advance, with the result that the star leaped forward in an age of progress never paralleled.

The beings, rapidly becoming Brains, found that by the extermination of the parasites and bacteria on Antares, by changing their own organic structure, and by *willing* to live, they approached immortality. They discovered the secrets of Time and Space; they knew the extent of the universe, and how Space in its farther reaches became self-annihilating. They knew that life was self-created and controlled its own period of duration. They knew that when a life, tired of existence, killed itself, it was dead forever; it could not live again, for death was the final chemical change of life.

These were the shapes that spread in the vast sea before the speaker. They were shapes because they could assume any form they wished. Their all-powerful minds had complete control of that which was themselves. When the Brains were desirous of traveling, they relaxed from their usual semi-rigidity and flowed from place to place like a stream of ink rushing down a hill; when they were tired, they flattened into disks; when expounding their thoughts, they became towering pillars of rigid ooze; and when lost in

abstraction, or in a pleasurable contemplation of the unbounded worlds created in their minds, within which they often wandered, they resembled huge, dormant balls.

From the speaker himself had come no sound although he had imparted his thoughts to his sentient assembly. The thoughts of the Brains, when their minds permitted, emanated to those about them instantly, like electric waves. Antares was a world of eternal, unbroken silence.

The Great Brain's thoughts continued to flow out. "Long ago, the approaching doom became known to us all. We could do nothing then; probably we can do nothing now. It does not matter greatly, of course, for existence is a useless thing which benefits no one. But nevertheless, at that meeting in an unremembered year, we asked those who were willing to try to think of some possible way of saving our own star, at least, if not the others. There was no reward offered, for there was no reward adequate. All that the Brain would receive would be glory as one of the greatest which has ever been produced. The rest of us, too, would receive only the effects of that glory in the knowledge that we had conquered fate, hitherto, and still, considered inexorable; we would derive pleasure only from the fact that we, self-creating and all but supreme, had made ourselves supreme by conquering the worst and most powerful menace which has ever attacked life, time, and the universe: the Cosmic Dust.

"Our most intelligent Brains have been thinking on this one subject for untold millions of years. They have excluded from their thoughts everything except the question: How can the dust be checked? They have produced innumerable plans which have been tested thoroughly. All have failed. We have hurled into the void uncontrollable bolts of lightning, interplanetary sheets of flame, in the hope that we might fuse masses of the dust into new, incandescent worlds. We have anchored huge magnets throughout Space, hoping to attract the dust, which is faintly magnetic, and thus to solidify it or clear much of it from the waste. We have caused fearful disturbances by exploding our most powerful compounds in the realms about us, hoping to set the dust so violently in motion that the chaos would become tempestuous with the storms of creation. With our rays of annihilation, we have blasted billion-mile paths through the ceaselessly surging dust. We have destroyed the life of Betelgeuse and rooted there titanic developers of vacua, sprawling, whirring machines to suck the dust from Space and heap it up on that star. We have liberated enormous

quantities of gas, lit them, and sent the hot and furious fires madly flashing through the affrighted dust. In our desperation, we have even asked for the aid of the Ether-Eaters. Yes, we have in finality exercised our Will-Power to sweep back the rolling billows! In vain! What has been accomplished? The dust has retreated for a moment, has paused—and has welled onward. It has returned silently triumphant, and it has again hung its pall of blackness over a fear-haunted and a nightmare-ridden Space."

Swelling in soundless sorrow through the Hall of the Mist rose the racing thoughts of the Great Brain. "Our chemists with a bitter doggedness never before displayed have devoted their time to the production of Super-Brains, in the hope of making one which could defeat the Cosmic Dust. They have changed the chemicals used in our genesis; they have experimented with molds and forms; they have tried every resource. With what result? There have come forth raging monstrosities, mad abominations, satanic horrors and ravenous foul things howling wildly the nameless and indescribable phantoms that thronged their minds. We have killed them in order to save ourselves. And the Dust has pushed onward! We have appealed to every living Brain to help us. We appealed, in the forgotten, dream-veiled centuries, for aid in any form. From time to time we have been offered plans, plans which for a while have made terrific and sweeping inroads on the Dust, but plans which have always failed.

"The triumph of the Cosmic Dust has almost come. There is so little time left us that our efforts now must inevitably be futile. But today, in the hope that some Brain, either of the old ones or of the gigantic new ones, has discovered a possibility not yet tried, we have called this conference, the first in more than twelve thousand years."

The tense, alert silence of the hall relaxed and became soft when the thoughts of the Great Brain had stopped flowing. The electric waves which had filled the vast Hall of the Mist sank, and for a long time a strange tranquillity brooded there. But the mass was never still; the sea in front of the dais rippled and billowed from time to time as waves of thought passed through it. Yet no Brain offered to speak, and the seething expanse, as the minutes crept by, again became quiet.

In a thin column on the dais, rising high into the air, swayed the Great Brain; again and again it swept its glance around the hall, peering among the rolling heaving shapes in the hope of finding somewhere in those thousands one which could offer a suggestion. But the minutes passed, and

time lengthened, with no response; and the sadness of the fixed and changeless end crept across the last race. And the Brains, wrapped in their meditation, saw the Dust pushing at the glass shell of Antares with triumphant mockery.

The Great Brain had expected no reply, since for centuries it had been considered futile to combat the Dust; and so, when its expectation, though not its wish, was fulfilled, it relaxed and dropped, the signal that the meeting was over.

But the motion had scarcely been completed, when from deep within the center of the sea there came a violent heave; in a moment, a section collected itself and rushed together; like a waterspout it swished upward and went streaming toward the roof until it swayed thin and tenuous as a column of smoke, the top of the Brain peering down from the dimness of the upper hall.

"I have found an infallible plan! The Red Brain has conquered the Cosmic Dust!"

A terrific tenseness leaped upon the Brains, numbed by the cry that wavered in silence down the Hall of the Mist into the empty and dreamless tomb of the farther marble. The Great Brain, hardly relaxed, rose again. And with a curious whirling motion the assembled horde suddenly revolved. Immediately, the Red Brain hung upward from the middle of the sea which had become an amphitheater in arrangement, all Brains looking toward the center. A suppressed expectancy and hope electrified the air.

The Red Brain was one of the later creations of the chemists, and had come forth during the experiments to produce more perfect Brains. Previously, they had all been black; but, perhaps because of impurities in the chemicals, this one had evolved in an extremely dark, dull-red color. It was regarded with wonder by its companions, and more so when they found that many of its thoughts could not be grasped by them. What it allowed the others to know of what passed within it was to a large extent incomprehensible. No one knew how to judge the Red Brain, but much had been expected from it.

Thus, when the Red Brain sent forth its announcement, the others formed a huge circle around, their minds passive and open for the explanation. Thus they lay, silent, while awaiting the discovery. And thus they reclined, completely unprepared for what followed.

For, as the Red Brain hung in the air, it began a slow but restless swaying; and as it swayed, its thoughts poured out in a rhythmic chant. High above them it towered, a smooth, slender column, whose lofty end was moving ever faster and faster while nervous shudders rippled up and down its length. And the alien chant became stronger, stronger, until it changed into a wild and dithyrambic paean to the beauty of the past, to the glory of the present, to the splendor of the future. And the lay became a moaning praise, an exaltation; a strain of furious joy ran through it, a repetition of, "The Red Brain has conquered the Dust. Others have failed, but he has not. Play the national anthem in honor of the Red Brain, for he has triumphed. Place him at your head, for he has conquered the Dust. Exalt him who has proved himself the greatest of all. Worship him who is greater than Antares, greater than the Cosmic Dust, greater than the Universe."

Abruptly it stopped. The puzzled Brains looked up. The Red Brain had ceased its nodding motion for a moment, and had closed its thoughts to them. But along its entire length it began a gyratory spinning, until it whirled at an incredible speed. Something antagonistic suddenly emanated from it. And before the Brains could grasp the situation, before they could protect themselves by closing their minds, the will-impulses of the Red Brain, laden with hatred and death, were throbbing about them and entering their open minds. Like a whirlwind spun the Red Brain, hurling forth its hate. Like half-inflated balloons, the other Brains had lain around it; like cooling glass bubbles, they tautened for a moment; and like pricked balloons, as their thoughts and thus their lives were annihilated, since Thought was Life, they flattened, instantaneously dissolving into pools of evanescent slime. By tens and by hundreds they sank, destroyed by the sweeping unchecked thoughts of the Red Brain which filled the hall; by groups, by sections, by paths around the entire circle fell the doomed Brains in that single moment of carelessness, while pools of thick ink collected, flowed together, crept onward, and became rivers of pitch rushing down the marble floor with a soft, silken swish.

The hope of the universe had lain with the Red Brain.

And the Red Brain was mad.

THE BEAST OF AVEROIGNE

Clark Ashton Smith

1. The Deposition of Brother Gérôme

I, a poor scrivener and the humblest monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Périgon, have been asked by our abbot Théophile to write down this record of a strange evil that is still rampant, still unquelled. And, ere I have done writing, it may be that the evil shall come forth again from its lurking-place, and again be manifest.

We, the friars of Périgon, and all others who have knowledge of this thing, agree that its advent was coeval with the first rising of the red comet which still burns nightly, a flying balefire, above the moonless hills. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, it rose below the Dragon in early summer; and now it follows the Scorpion toward the western woods. Some say that the horror came from the comet, flying without wings to earth across the stars. And truly, before this summer of 1369, and the lifting of that red, disastrous scourge upon the heavens, there was no rumor or legend of such a thing in all Averoigne.

As for me, I must deem that the beast is a spawn of the seventh hell, a foulness born of the bubbling, flame-blent ooze; for it has no likeness to the beasts of earth, to the creatures of air and water. And the comet may well have been the fiery vehicle of its coming.

To me, for my sins and unworthiness, was it first given to behold the beast. Surely the sight thereof was a warning of those ways which lead to perdition: for on that occasion I had broken the rule of St. Benedict which forbids eating during a one-day's errand away from the monastery. I had tarried late, after bearing a letter from Théophile to the good priest of Ste. Zénobie, though I should have been back well before evensong. And also, apart from eating, I had drunk the mellow white wine of Ste. Zénobie with its kindly people. Doubtless because I had done these things, I met the nameless, night-born terror in the woods behind the abbey when I returned.

The day had vanished, fading unaware; and the long summer eve, without moon, had thickened to a still and eldritch darkness ere I

approached the abbey postern. And hurrying along the forest path, I felt an eerie fear of the gnarled, hunchback oaks and their pit-deep shadows. And when I saw between their antic boughs the vengefully streaming fire of the new comet, which seemed to pursue me as I went, the goodly warmth of the wine died out and I began to regret my truancy. For I knew that the comet was a harbinger of ill, an omen of death and Satanry to come.

Now, as I passed among the ancient trees that tower thickly, growing toward the postern, I thought that I beheld a light from one of the abbey windows and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, I saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough beside my path; and moreover, it moved as with the flitting of a restless fenfire, and was wholly dissimilar to the honest glow of a lamp, lantern or taper. And the light was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with ineffable terror, I beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to the height of a tall man, and it moved with the swaying of a great serpent, and its members undulated as if they were boneless. The round black head, having no visible ears or hair, was thrust forward on a neck of snakish length. Two eyes, small and lidless, glowing hotly as coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in the noseless face above the serrate gleaming of bat-like teeth.

This much I saw, and no more, ere the thing went past me with the strange nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, I could form no just notion. It uttered no sound, and its motion was altogether silent. Running and slithering rapidly, it disappeared in the bough-black night, among the antique oaks; and I saw the hellish light no more.

I was nigh dead with fear when I reached the abbey and sought admittance at the postern. And the porter who came at last to admit me, after I had knocked many times, forbore to chide me for my tardiness when I told him of that which I had seen in the moonless wood.

On the morrow, I was called before Théophile, who rebuked me sternly for my breach of discipline, and imposed a penance of daylong solitude. Being forbidden to hold speech with the others, I did not hear till the second

morn of the thing that was found before nones in the wood behind Périgon, where I had met the nameless beast.

The thing was a great stag which had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or hunter or poacher. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid bare the spine from neck to tail; and the spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion of the stag had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such a manner; but many, for the first time, began to credit my tale, which the abbot and the brothers had hitherto looked upon as a sort of drunken dream. Verily, they said, a creature from the Pit was abroad, and this creature had killed the stag and had sucked the marrow from its broken spine. And I, aghast with the recollection of that loathly vision, marvelled at the mercy of God, which had permitted me to escape the doom of the stag.

None other, it seemed, had beheld the monster on that occasion; for all the monks, save me, had been asleep in the dormitory; and Théophile had retired early to his cell. But, during the nights that followed the slaying of the stag, the presence of this baleful thing was made manifest to all.

Now, night by night, the comet greatened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars blenched before it and terror shadowed the thoughts of men. And in our prayers, from prime to evensong, we sought to deprecate the unknown ills which the comet would bring in its train. And day by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to visit the abbey, we heard the tale of fearsome and mysterious depredations, similar in all ways to the killing of the stag.

Dead wolves were found with their chines laid open and the spinal marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it would seem, the beast grew bolder—or else it wearied of such humble prey as deer and wolves, horses and oxen.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the helpless dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zénobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had laid open their vertebrae. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn into shreds from crown to heel, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed inextricably with the rags of their cerements. From this, it

would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafter the dead were not molested; but a grievous toll was taken from the living. On the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest at a distance of no more than a mile from Périgon, were slain foully in their hut. Other charcoal-burners, dwelling nearby, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the grey starlight the departure of a black, obscenely glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their hapless fellows, who, they then discovered, had been served in the same manner as the wolves and other victims of the beast.

When the tale of this happening was brought to the abbey, Théophile called me before him and questioned me closely anent the apparition which I had encountered. He, like the others, had doubted me at first, deeming that I was frightened by a shadow or by some furtive creature of the wood. But, after the series of atrocious maraudings, it was plain to all that a fiendish thing such as had never been fabled in Averoigne, was abroad and ravening through the summer woods. And moreover it was plain that this thing was the same which I had beheld on the eve of my return from Ste. Zénobie.

Our good abbot was greatly exercised over this evil, which had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood of the abbey, and whose depredations were all committed within a five-hours' journey of Périgon. Pale from his over-strict austerities and vigils, with hollow cheeks and burning eyes, Théophile called me before him and made me tell my story over and over, listening as one who flagellates himself for a fancied sin. And though I, like all others, was deeply sensible of this hellish horror and the scandal of its presence, I marvelled somewhat at the godly wrath and indignation of our abbot, in whom blazed a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai.

"Truly," he said, "there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the monks of Périgon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair, which lies haply at our very portals."

So, on the afternoon of that same day, Théophile, together with myself and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth from the abbey and made search of the mighty forest for miles around, entering with lifted crosses, by torchlight, the deep caves to which we came, but finding no

fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, we searched the vaults of the ruined castle of Faussesflammes, which is said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could we trace the sable monster, or find any sign of its lairing.

Since then, the middle summer has gone by with nightly deeds of terror, beneath the blasting of the comet. Beasts, men, children, women, have been done to death by the monster, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, has ranged afield even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frénaie and Ximes. And some have beheld the monster at night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man has ever beheld it by day.

Thrice has the horror been seen in the woods behind the abbey; and once, by full moonlight, a brother peering from his window descried it in the abbey garden, as it glided between the rows of peas and turnips, going toward the forest. And all agree that the thing is silent, uttering no sound, and is swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Much have these occurrences preyed on our abbot, who keeps to his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil, and comes forth no longer, as was his wont, to dine and hold converse with the guests of the abbey. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grows, and a strange illness devours him as if with perpetual fever; and he mortifies the flesh till he totters with weakness. And we others, living in the fear of God, and abhorring the deeds of Satan, can only pray that the unknown scourge be lifted from the land, and pass with the passing of the comet.

2. The Letter of Théophile to Sister Therèse

To you, my sister in God as well as by consanguinity, I must ease my mind (if this be possible) by writing again of the dread thing that harbors close to Périgon: for this thing has struck once more within the abbey walls, coming in darkness and without sound or other ostent than the Phlegethonian luster that surrounds its body and members.

I have told you of the death of Brother Gérôme, slain at evening in his cell, while he was copying an Alexandrian manuscript. Now the fiend has become even bolder; for last night it entered the dormitory, where the brothers sleep in their robes, girded and ready to arise instantly. And without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethean spell, it took Brother Augustin, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row. And

the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Augustin awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath a mass of bloody tatters.

On this occasion, the Beast was not beheld by anyone; but at other times, full often, it has been seen around the abbey; and its craftiness and hardihood are beyond belief, except as those of an archdevil. And I know not where the horror will end; for exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows have failed to prevent the intrusion of the Beast; and God and Christ and all the holy Saints are deaf to our prayers.

Of the terror laid upon Averoigne by this thing, and the bale and mischief it has wrought outside the abbey, I need not tell, since all this will have come to you as a matter of common report. But here, at Périgon, there is much that I would not have rumored publicly, lest the good fame of the abbey should suffer. I deem it an humiliating thing, and a derogation and pollution of our sanctity, that a foul fiend should have ingress to our halls unhindered and at will.

There are strange whispers among the brothers, who believe that Satan himself has risen to haunt us. Several have met the Beast even in the chapel, where it has left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence. Bolts and locks are vain against it; and vain is the lifted cross to drive it away. It comes and goes at its own choosing; and they who behold it flee in irrestrainable terror. None knows where it will strike next; and there are those among the brothers who believe it menaces me, the elected abbot of Périgon; since many have seen it gliding along the hall outside my cell. And Brother Constantin, the cellarer, who returned late from a visit to Vyônes not long ago, swears that he saw it by moonlight as it climbed the wall toward that window of my cell which faces the great forest. And seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

All, it would seem, save me, have beheld the monster. And now, my sister, I must confess a strange thing, which above all else would attest the influential power of Hell in this matter, and the hovering of the wings of Asmodai about Périgon.

Each night since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before the Christ on the silver crucifix; and oblivion

steeps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn. Of that which goes on in the abbey I know nothing; and all the brothers might be done to death by the Beast, and their spines broken and sucked as is its invariable fashion, without my knowledge.

Haircloth have I worn; and thorns and thistle-burs have I strewn on the floor, to awake me from this evil and ineluctable slumber that is like the working of some Orient drug. But the thorns and thistles are as a couch of paradisal ease, and I feel them not till dawn. And dim and confused are my senses when I awaken; and deep languor thralls my limbs. And day by day a lethal weakness grows upon me, which all ascribe to saintly pernoctations of prayer and austerity.

Surely I have become the victim of a spell, and am holden by a baleful enchantment while the Beast is abroad with its hellish doings. Heaven, in its inscrutable wisdom, punishing me for what sin I know not, has delivered me utterly to this bondage and has thrust me down to the sloughs of a Stygian despair.

Ever I am haunted by an eerie notion, that the Beast comes nightly to earth from the red comet which passes like a fiery wain above Averoigne; and by day it returns to the comet, having eaten its fill of that provender for which it seeks. And only with the comet's fading will the horror cease to harry the land and infest Périgon. But I know not if this thought is madness, or a whisper from the Pit.

Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil. And I, in my turn, pray that such things may touch you not nor approach you in the quiet cloisters of the convent at Ximes ....

3. The Story of Luc le Chaudronnier

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I write this record of the true origin and slaying of that creature known as the Beast of Averoigne. And when I have ended the writing, the record shall be sealed in a brazen box, and that box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the dreadful verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies

to be divulged while any who took part in the happening are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

The ravages of the Beast, however, are common knowledge, and have become a tale with which to frighten children. Men say that it slew fifty people, night by night, in the summer of 1369, devouring in each case the spinal marrow. It ranged mostly about the abbey of Périgon and to Ximes and Ste. Zénobie and La Frênaie. Its nativity and lairing-place were mysteries that none could unravel; and church and state were alike powerless to curb its maraudings, so that a dire terror fell upon the land and people went to and fro as in the shadow of death.

From the very beginning, because of my own commerce with occult things and with the spirits of darkness, the baleful Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells, but had come with the flaming comet from ulterior space; but regarding its character and attributes and genesis, I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar devils.

Then I bethought me of the ring of Eibon, which I had inherited from my fathers, who were also wizards. The ring had come down, it was said, from ancient Hyperborea; and it was made of a redder gold than any that the earth yields in latter cycles, and was set with a great purple gem, somber and smouldering, whose like is no longer to be found. And in the gem an antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds and ages, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring of Eibon and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning of the demon. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a voice that was like the shrill singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of the one method by which the Beast could be banished, if

overtaken in a tangible shape. Even to me, the student of darkness, these revelations were a source of horror and surprise. And for many reasons, I deemed the mode of exorcism a doubtful and perilous thing. But the demon had sworn that there was no other way.

Musing on these dark matters, I waited among my books and braziers and alembics, for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

Toward the end of August, when the great comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred the lamentable death of Sister Therèse, killed by the Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent of Ximes. On this occasion, the Beast was plainly seen by late passers as it ran down the convent wall by moonlight from a window; and others met it in the shadowy streets or watched it climb the city ramparts, running like a monstrous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

To me, following the death of Therèse, there came privily the town marshal, together with the abbot Théophile, in whose worn features and bowed form I descried the ravages of mortal sorrow and horror and humiliation. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitation, begged my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

“You, Messire le Chaudronnier,” said the marshal, “are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery, and the spells that summon or dismiss evil demons and other spirits. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be that you shall succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims. In return for your aid, we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition and prosecution which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyônes, are privy to this offer, which must be kept secret.”

“I ask no reward,” I replied, “if it be in my power to rid Averoigne of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and one that is haply attended by strange perils.”

“All assistance that can be given you shall be yours to command,” said the marshal. “Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be.”

Then Théophile, speaking in a low, broken voice, assured me that all doors, including those of the abbey of Périgon, would be opened at my request, and that everything possible would be done to further the laying of the fiend.

I reflected briefly, and said:

"Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms, mounted, and with a third steed. And let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit Périgon, where the horror seems to center."

Remembering the advice of the gem-imprisoned demon, I made no preparation for the journey, except to place upon my index finger the ring of Eibon, and to arm myself with a small hammer, which I placed at my girdle in lieu of a sword. Then I awaited the set hour, when the men and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying swords and halberds. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Périgon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran for many miles through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in answer to some question, and then briefly. This pleased me; for I knew that they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees; and soon the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inexorable net of evil. Deeper we went, into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks, except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The abbot, returning at sunset from Ximes, had given word to the porter of our coming, and he would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he did, and during the course of the tour, he indicated a certain window in the second story as being that of Théophile's chamber. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness

in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable custom, in spite of the oft-repeated demoniac invasions of the monastery. Behind the window we saw the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the abbey and had left us, we returned to the space before Théophile's window and began our long watch in silence.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks and pines, and pouring a spectral silver on the grey stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flared among the lusterless signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a tall oak, where none could see us from the windows. When the moon had passed over, sloping westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow shifting of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn, the taper went out in Théophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready weapons, the two men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trace of trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I drew the ring of Eibon from my finger, and made ready for that which the demon had directed me to do.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the slow night ebbed; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great oak had reached the wall and was climbing toward Théophile's window, there came the thing I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and without forewarning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as a kindling, windblown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of ghostly blood, the black and semi-serpentine form of the Beast. A flat and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp serrate teeth, and I heard the teeth clash and grate on the linked iron. Swiftly I laid the ring of Eibon on a stone I had

placed in readiness, and broke the dark jewel with a blow of the hammer that I carried.

From the pieces of the lightly shattered gem, the disemprisoned demon rose in the form of a smoky fire, small as a candle-flame at first, and greatening like the conflagration of piled faggots. And, hissing softly with the voice of fire, and brightening to a wrathful, terrible gold, the demon leapt forward to do battle with the Beast, even as it had promised me, in return for its freedom after cycles of captivity.

It closed upon the Beast with a vengeful flaring, tall as the flame of an auto-da-fé, and the Beast relinquished the man-at-arms on the ground beneath it, and writhed back like a burnt serpent. The body and members of the Beast were loathfully convulsed, and they seemed to melt in the manner of wax and to change dimly and horribly beneath the flame, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment, like a werewolf that returns from its beasthood, the thing took on the wavering similitude of man. The unclean blackness flowed and swirled, assuming the weft of cloth amid its changes, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then, from the cowl, a face began to peer, and the face, though shadowy and distorted, was that of the abbot Théophile.

This prodigy I beheld for an instant; and the men also beheld it. But still the fire-shaped demon assailed the abhorrently transfigured thing, and the face melted again into waxy blackness, and a great column of sooty smoke arose, followed by an odor as of burning flesh commingled with some mighty foulness. And out of the volumed smoke, above the hissing of the demon, there came a single cry in the voice of Théophile. But the smoke thickened, hiding both the assailant and that which it assailed; and there was no sound, other than the singing of fed fire.

At last, the sable fumes began to lift, ascending and disappearing amid the boughs, and a dancing golden light, in the shape of a will-o'-the-wisp, went soaring over the dark trees toward the stars. And I knew that the demon of the ring had fulfilled its promise, and had now gone back to those remote and ultramundane deeps from which the sorcerer Eibon had drawn it down in Hyperborea to become the captive of the purple gem.

The stench of burning passed from the air, together with the mighty foulness; and of that which had been the Beast there was no longer any trace. So I knew that the horror born of the red comet had been driven away by the fiery demon. The fallen man-at-arms had risen, unharmed beneath

his mail, and he and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught. But I knew that they had seen the changes of the Beast, and had divined something of the truth. So, while the moon grew grey with the nearness of dawn, I made them swear an awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Périgon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Théophile should suffer no calumny, we aroused the porter. We averred that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Théophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. I had exorcised the unclean devil, which had vanished in a cloud of sulphurous fire and vapor; and, most unluckily, the abbot had been consumed by the fire. His death, I said, was a true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Périgon, since the exorcism I had used was infallible.

This tale was accepted without question by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough, for Théophile had been innocent, and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that came upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come down from the passing comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its energumen, moulding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

It had slain a peasant girl in Ste. Zénobie on that night while we waited behind the abbey. But thereafter the Beast was seen no more in Averoigne; and the murderous deeds were not repeated.

In time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. The abbot Théophile was canonized for his strange martyrdom; and they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could have prevailed thus upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for thin is the veil betwixt man and the godless deep. The skies are haunted by that which it were madness to know; and strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies. Unnamable things have come to

us in alien horror and will come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth.

THE WILL OF CLAUDE ASHUR

C. Hall Thompson

I

They have locked me in. A moment since, for what well may have been the last time, I heard the clanking of the triple-bolts as they were shot into place. The door to this barren white chamber presents no extraordinary appearance, but it is plated with impenetrable steel. The executives of the Institution have gone to great pains to ensure the impossibility of escape. They know my record. They have listed me among those patients who are dangerous and "recurrently violent." I haven't contradicted them; it does no good to tell them that my violence is long since spent; that I have no longer the inclination nor the strength requisite to make yet another attempted break for freedom. They cannot understand that my freedom meant something to me only so long as there was hope of saving Gratia Thane from the horror that returned from the flesh-rotting brink of the grave to reclaim her. Now, that hope is lost; there is nothing left but the welcome release of death. I can die as well in an insane asylum as elsewhere.

Today, the examinations, both physical and mental, were quickly dispensed with. They were a formality; routine gone through "for the record." The doctor has left. He wasn't the man who usually examines me. I presume he is new at the Institution. He was a tiny man, fastidiously dressed, with a narrow, flushed face and a vulgar diamond stickpin. There were lines of distaste and fear about his mouth from the moment he looked into the loathsome mask that is my face. Doubtless one of the white-suited attendants warned him of the particular horror of my case. I didn't resent it when he came no nearer me than necessary. Rather, I pitied the poor devil for the awkwardness of his situation; I have known men of obviously stronger stomach to stumble away from the sight of me, retching with sick terror. My name, the unholy whisperings of my story, the remembrance of the decaying, breathing half-corpse that I am, are legendary in the winding gray halls of the Asylum. I cannot blame them for being relieved by the knowledge that they will soon shed the burden I have been—that, before long, they will consign this unhuman mass of pulsating flesh to maggots and oblivion.

Before the doctor left, he wrote something in his notebook; there would be the name: Claude Ashur. Under today's date he has written only a few all-explanatory words. "Prognosis negative. Hopelessly insane. Disease in most advanced stage. Demise imminent."

Watching the slow, painful progress of his pen across the paper, I experienced one last temptation to speak. I was overwhelmed with a violent need to scream out my now-familiar protest to this new man, in the desperate hope that he might believe me. The blasphemous words welled for an instant in my throat, sending forth a thick nasal sob. Quickly, the doctor glanced up, and the apprehensive loathing of his gaze told me the truth. It would do no good to speak. He was like all the rest, with their soothing voices and unbelieving smiles. He would listen to the hideous nightmare that is the story of Gratia and my brother and myself, and, in the end, he would nod calmly, more convinced than ever that I was stark, raving mad. I remained silent. The last flame of hope guttered and died. I knew in that moment, that no one would ever believe that I am not Claude Ashur.

Claude Ashur is my brother.

Do not misunderstand me. This is no mundane instance of confused identity. It is something infinitely more evil. It is a horror conceived and realized by a warped brain bent upon revenge; a mind in league with the powers of darkness, attuned to the whimpering of lost, forbidden rites and incantations. No one ever could have mistaken me for Claude Ashur. To the contrary, from the earliest days of our childhood, people found it difficult to believe that we were brothers. There could not have been two creatures more unlike than he and I. If you will imagine the average boy and man, the medium-built creature of normal weight and nondescript features, whose temperament is safely, if somewhat dully balanced—in short, the product of normalcy—you will have before you a portrait of myself. My brother, Claude, was the precise antithesis of all these things.

He was always extremely delicate of health, and given to strange moodiness. His head seemed too large for the fragility of his body, and his face was constantly shadowed by a pallor that worried my father dreadfully.

His nose was long and thin with supersensitive nostril-volutes, and his eyes, set well apart in deep sockets, held a sort of mirthless brilliance. From the outset, I was the stronger as well as the elder, and yet it was always Claude with his frail body and powerful will who ruled Inneswich Priory.

At a certain point in the road that fingers its way along the lifeless, Atlantic-clawed stretches of the Northern New Jersey coast, the

unsuspecting traveler may turn off into a bramble-clotted byway. There is (or was, at one time), a signpost pointing inland that proclaims: “INNESWICH —½ MILE.” Not many take that path today. People who know that part of the country give wide berth to Inneswich and the legends that hang like a slimy caul over the ancient coastal village. They have heard infamous tales of the Priory that lies on the northernmost edge of Inneswich, and of late years, the town, the Priory, the few intrepid villagers who cling to their homes, have fallen into ill-repute. Things were different in the days before the coming of Claude Ashur.

My father, Edmund Ashur, was the pastor of the Inneswich Lutheran Church; he had come to the Priory, a timid, middle-aged man with his young bride, two years before I was born. The night Claude Ashur was born Inneswich Priory became the house of death.

The night Claude was born. I have never really thought of it that way; to me, it has always been the night my mother died. Even I, child that I was, had been caught in the web of the pervading sense of doom that hung over Inneswich Priory all that day. A damp sea-breeze, smelling of rain, had swept westward, and perforce, I had spent the day indoors. The house had been uncannily quiet, with only the muffled footfalls of my father, pacing in the library, trying to smile when his gaze chanced to meet mine. I did not know, then, that the time for the accouchement was near. I knew only that, in the last weeks, my mother had been too pale, and the huge, cold rooms seemed lonely for her laughter. Toward nightfall, the village physician, a round apple-cheeked man named Ellerby, was summoned; he brought me taffy from the general store as he always did, and shortly after he disappeared up the wide staircase, I was packed off to bed. For what seemed like hours I lay in the dark, while a leaden bulwark of clouds rolled inland with the storm. Rain lashing against my casement, I fell to sleep at last, crying because my mother hadn’t come to kiss me goodnight.

I thought it was the screaming that woke me. I know, now, that the pain-torn cries had died long-since with my mother’s last shuddering breath. Perhaps some final plaintive echo had slithered along the blackened halls finding my sleep-fogged, child’s brain at last. A cold, nameless terror numbed me as I crept down the winding carpeted stairs. At the newelpost, a soft, desperate lost sound stopped me. And then, through the open library door, I saw them. My father was sunken in a leather armchair by the fireless grate; candlelight wavered on the hands that covered his face. Uncontrollable sobs wracked his bowed shoulders. After a moment, his face

more solemn and pallid than I had ever seen it, Dr. Ellerby came from the shadow beyond my view. His thin, ineffectual hand touched Father's arm gently. His voice was thick.

"I … I know how little words help, Edmund … I just want you to know, I did all I could. Mrs. Ashur was …" He shrugged his plump shoulders in impotent rage at fate. "She just wasn't strong enough. It was odd; as if the baby were too much for her—too powerful—taking all the strength, the will from her. It was as if …"

His words withered into nothingness, and crawling abysmal darkness clawed me. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. Fear and loneliness knotted in my chest. I could barely breathe. Years later, the completion of that last unfinished sentence of Ellerby's became horribly clear to me. "It was as if he had killed her, so that he could live …"

They buried Mother in a shaded corner of the graveyard behind the church. The villagers came and stood in the needling downpour, their heads bowed in voiceless grief. And through all of it, irreverent and demanding, came the belligerent howling of the infant Claude; there was something blasphemous and terribly wrong about those dominant cries. It was as though, somehow, this dark-browed bawling child was an intimate of death and felt no need to grieve or be frightened in the face of it.

From that day forth, Inneswich Priory was Claude Ashur's private domain. It is true that the howling, open belligerence soon quieted, and even in his early boyhood, Claude's voice attained an unusually sibilant modulation. But, never did it become less dominant. On the contrary, the very calm softness of it seemed to lend it more strength, more power to influence the listener. It was Claude's will, not his voice, that ruled the Priory and everyone in it. The voice was merely an instrument of the will.

My father was Claude's slave. All the tender unpretentious love he had given my mother before her death was now lavished on Claude. I believe Father saw in him a final remembrance of the gentle creature whose grave was never bare of flowers. I was sorry for Father. For, from the outset, that brooding, frail creature seemed not to need love or help. All his life, Claude Ashur was coldly self-sufficient, and completely capable of getting anything he wanted.

Worry over the dubious condition of Claude's health led my father into further extravagances. Rather than send Claude to school, which would necessitate his leaving the gloomy protection of the Priory, Father brought in a series of tutors. The plan was never a success. Time and again, it started off

well, and some bookish, middle-aged man or woman would think that he or she had a perfectly priceless berth at the Priory. The tutelage of one boy seemed like the easiest job in the world. But, invariably, the tutors eventually developed a violent dislike, hidden or overt, for Claude. They never remained at Inneswich Priory more than a fortnight. Often, when one of them had just gone, I would chance to look up from the garden to find Claude's pale, thin face framed in a window. The colorless lips were always haunted by a satisfied, malignant smile. And, once more, the brash intruder cast out, the furtive shadow of my brother's isolationism would settle, shroud-like, over the Priory.

II

In the East Wing of Inneswich Priory, beyond a massive, baroque door, lay a chamber I had never seen. Unholy stories of that room have haunted the hamlet of Inneswich since one ghastly night late in the eighteenth century. My father never spoke of the awesome legends that cluttered, murmuring obscenely, behind that carven portal. It was enough for him that, for more than a hundred years, the room had been sealed off and forgotten. But, Claude and I had heard others—the hired help who came by day from the village to the Priory—whisper the hideous details many times, seeming to relish the vicarious thrill they experienced while discussing past and hidden evil.

In the year 1793, one Jabez Driesen, then pastor of Inneswich Church, returned from a sabbatical spent in Europe. He brought with him the woman he had met and married on the Continent. There are written reports of her beauty in the archives of the library at Inneswich, but, for the most part, they are at cross-purposes and garbled. On one issue alone, every report is in accord. The wife of Jabez Driesen was a secret disciple of witchcraft; she had been born in some obscure Hungarian village of ill-repute, and it was whispered through the streets of Inneswich that this sorceress—this consort of the darkness—must die. The whispering grew to an open protest that reached Jabez Driesen's ears, and one night a frantic, witless crone who served the Driesens ran screaming from the Priory. Investigating the reason for her babbling hysteria, the villagers found the answer in that chamber in the East Wing. The charred remains of Jabez Driesen's bride were discovered, manacled to a stake in the tremendous, ancient fireplace, and, swinging noiselessly from one of the massive, hand-squared ceiling beams,

was the corpse of the pastor of Inneswich Church. Next day, the bodies were removed and buried, and the room was sealed. When Claude Ashur was twelve years of age, he claimed that chamber for his own.

Father was more worried than ever; at last, he openly admitted that he was frightened of Claude's tendency to isolationism. With the acquisition of the room in the East Wing, Claude withdrew almost entirely from the outer world. There was something alarming and unhealthy in the way he spent whole days and nights alone in his inviolable sanctum. The heavy, exquisitely carved door was kept locked at all times. Occasionally, on clear, dry days, Claude would wander aimlessly for hours along the bleached desert of the beach; he always carried the key to that door with him. Prompted by my own curiosity and my father's concern, I tried often to find some basis of mutual interest that would draw me closer to Claude—that would put me in a position where I might learn the nature of the secrets he hid so jealously in his lonely, ghost-ridden room. Once or twice, I even made a move to join him in his solitary expeditions along the edge of the sea. His dark, resentful taciturnity soon made it obvious that I wasn't welcome. In the end, nagged by a vague sense of frustration, I gave it up. I should probably never have had the courage to defy Claude, and break into the forbidden chamber, had it not been for my Irish setter, Tam.

Aware, as he was, of my affection for dogs, on the eve of my twenty-second birthday, Father presented me with Tam. Then little more than a year old, the dog was already well-trained; he had the keen intelligence, the gentle eyes, the shining russet hair that somehow set his breed in a special niche. In no time at all, Tam and I were inseparable companions. Wherever I went, Tam was at my heels. His coltish, often hilarious adventures served to lighten somewhat the gloom that had coated Inneswich Priory like some loathsome, smothering scum that happiness and sunlight could not penetrate. And, from the moment he laid eyes on him, Claude resented Tam.

As though by some inborn instinct, the dog avoided my brother on every possible occasion. It was nothing new. Without exception, animals of every sort displayed an often vicious aversion to Claude. It was as if their antediluvian sensitiveness warned them against some buried evil of which the duller senses of humans were unaware. Generally, this open enmity caused nothing but a rather sardonic amusement on Claude's part. But, in the case of Tam, he seemed unusually irritated. Perhaps it was because, unwittingly, the dog was violating the domain so long controlled by Claude's

will alone. In any event, in a manner that somehow roused uneasy suspicion in me, he made an unwonted effort to befriend Tam.

- - -

On that particular afternoon, Tam and I had been having our habitual romp in the ash-shaded quiet of the Priory garden. I remember laughing at the way Tam bounded off after an autumn-decayed twig of ash I had tossed in the direction of the flagstone terrace that lay just without the French casements of the library. Then, abruptly, before he had reached the twig, the setter stopped short. I saw his lean rusty body, dappled by late-afternoon sun, grow tense; his muzzle trembled, baring vicious canines. The frolicsome, gentle Tam of a moment before had turned into a terrified animal at bay.

I looked up and saw Claude standing over the ash-twig Tam had been chasing. He was smiling, his pale lips warped, showing small white teeth, but there was no humor in his eyes. Behind them lay the shadow of angry annoyance. I thought he winced at the snarl that sounded in Tam's throat. And then, before I could interfere, with a harsh furious laugh, Claude made a wild grab for the dog. I heard him say, "Come here, you little devil!" I heard Tam's hysterical yelp, and then, a sharp exclamation of pain.

"Tam!" I cried. "Down, Tam! Down!"

As suddenly as it had begun, the terrible furor quieted. A pregnant, awful stillness settled on the ash-grove. A single leaf quivered to the chilled stones at my feet. Tam whimpered plaintively as he slunk toward me, and cowered, shivering, against my leg. Claude didn't swear; he didn't even speak. He stood very still, staring down at the blood that oozed obscenely from the wicked gashes that scored the back of his white-skinned hand. When his eyes shifted to the shuddering beast at my side, they were seething with pent-up malevolence that whispered of satanic hatred older than man himself; a fury born of lost eons when such hatred ruled the world. After a long moment, Claude turned on his heel, and disappeared through the French windows into the murky dimness of the library. The hand with which I gave Tam a reassuring pat trembled. I told myself I was being foolish; there was no need to be afraid. But, the following evening, Tam disappeared.

At dusk, I had gone to the kennel to unleash Tam and take him for his nightly run into the village. I had found only the ragged end of the leash tethered to a metal ring by the kennel door. And standing there, in the gathering, mist-choked darkness, I had a sudden vision of the controlled rage in Claude's bloodless face, and that forbidding, truth-hiding door in the East Wing. I shuddered. I argued that I was letting my imagination run away with

me. It was possible that Tam had gnawed his way to freedom, and dashed on to the village ahead of me. But, even before I walked the nightroad to Inneswich, before I made inquiries at the tavern, and questioned the children who played Lie-Low-Sheepy in the streets, I knew what the answers would be. No one had seen or heard of Tam since last night when he'd been to the village with me. A strange, frozen anger took possession of me as I returned to Inneswich Priory that night. I knew that I was going to violate Claude Ashur's sanctuary.

Before retiring, the housekeeper had left a tray in the library for me. There were sandwiches and scones and a pot of chocolate. I didn't touch any of it. Strangely wary, I crept through the catacombs of the lower hall, and in the sepulchral gloom of the pantry, found what I wanted. From a rusty, seldom-used tool-chest, I extracted a length of heavy wire; I bent one end of it into a neat hook, then, soundlessly, tensely, as before, I went back along the hall and climbed the wide, winding staircase. Somewhere in the house, a weary joist groaned eerie, century-old protest. From his room at the head of the stairs, came Father's heavy reassuringly human snore. A little further on, the door to Claude's bedchamber was ajar. There was no light. I paused, not breathing, and stared into the stygian blackness of the room. Slowly, cold watery moonlight picked out Claude's form sprawled across the great canopied bed. His breathing came slow and deep. With a painstaking furtiveness that somewhat surprised me, I closed his door and moved on through cloying shadows toward the chamber in the East Wing.

I was not sure I could do it. The twisted wire wavered in my unsteady fingers, rattling like hell-wrought ghost chains in the antiquated lock. I don't know how long I manipulated the wire before I was rewarded by the sullen, rasping click of reluctant tumblers. Under the pressure of my sweat-damp hand, the massive door swung inward. At first, there was nothing but a swimming, thickened darkness that seemed to suck me into the vortex of a black whirlpool. Then, I felt suddenly sick. A horrible, grave-smelling effluvium pressed in upon me from every quarter. It was the stench of lost ages, the noisome, ectoplasmic aura of carrion-flesh.

I lit a candle and by its luminance saw in a small cleared circle, surrounded by the baleful, winking-glass anachronism of test-tubes and retorts, a statuette that seemed to have been carved from damp, half rotten wood. I took a step forward and stared down at a form of craftsmanship that was at once exquisite and indescribably evil; I had the feeling that the hands which chiseled this thing must have been directed by some unholy genius.

No human art could have wrought so uncannily perfect an image of Tam. Sprawled on its side, the miniature animal glazed into the candleglow with hideously blank eyes. There was an ugly gash in the full throat that ran from ear to ear, and from that carven wound pulsed the vile, greenish ichor that spread in a slow pool upon the scarred surface of the table!

I cannot say for certain how long I stood staring at that fetid, putrescent tableau of death. Disjointed, unbearable visions of the gentle animal that had come to mean so much to me infested the darkness about me. Physical illness returned, knotting my stomach, and I thought of Tam, alone somewhere, whimpering away the last of his brief life. At breakfast the next morning, the housekeeper bustled in to say that a fisherman from the village wanted urgently to speak with me. They had found Tam.

A dank mist fingered inland from the bleakness of the Atlantic. It swirled like séance-conjured ectoplasm among the dew-chilled fronds that spiked the crest of the dune. I knelt for a time beside the pitiful, limp form that lay half-covered with wind-blown sand. The rich rusty hair at Tam's throat was matted with a darker crimson stickiness. The horrid slit gaped redly, like the grotesque smile of a cretin. Tam had been dead for hours. I stood erect and the little fisherman wiped a furtive tear from the salt-burned seams of his face.

"Us at the village liked Tam, sir. He was so gentle-like with the children …" He snuffled and shook his head. "Musta been a awful big beast as could make such a tear in his gullet …"

I didn't say anything. I sent the little man for a spade and a length of tarpaulin. We wrapped Tam in the canvas and buried him there on the dune. The sand was damp and cold; icy mist settled in the shallow pit of the grave. When we had filled it in, I marked it with a single, bleached seashell. All the time we worked, I thought of the fisherman's words, and I knew that nothing natural, neither beast nor human, had destroyed Tam.

Father never knew the truth; I let him believe the story that circulated among the villagers—the tale of some wandering animal that had fought with Tam and killed him. I had no desire to aggravate my father's uneasiness in connection with Claude. He was getting on in years and had not been really well since Mother's death, and I wanted him to spend his declining days in peace.

When, shortly after dinner, I decided to retire, Claude climbed the long stairway at my side. He didn't speak but at my door he paused. Involuntarily, I looked at him. He was smiling, his pallid, mature visage an odd contrast

against the boyishness of his clothes; I had seen that face before. It held the same triumphant, cruelly-humorous smile that had been framed in the window the day the last tutor deserted Inneswich Priory. Once again, Claude Ashur's will had conquered the transgressor. After a long moment, softly, he said, "Goodnight," and walked off along the shade-clotted corridor that led to the room in the East Wing. I didn't see him again for nearly four years.

III

The following morning, before Claude was up and about, I bade goodbye to my father, and, as I'd been planning to do for some time, left for Princeton to study journalism. For several months the darkling memory of those last hours at the Priory hovered always at the rim of consciousness, but, gradually, forgetfulness pressed the horrible fate of Tam into a cobwebbed niche of the past. My life at the university became a comfortably mundane round that was far removed from the existence I had led under the shadow of my brother at Inneswich Priory. My sole material connection with Claude during those four happily crowded years was the correspondence I carried on with Father. With the passage of time his letters grew increasingly strained; try, as he obviously did, to seem cheerful and satisfied, he could never quite keep apprehensive references to Claude from slipping into them. Those scant phrases, hinting that Claude was becoming more and more secretive and unmanageable, invariably cast me backward through endless corridors of gloom, evoking a terrible picture of the loathsome, grinning face I wanted only to forget. Then, too, beyond the transient uneasiness caused by my father's restrained messages, there were moments when I felt certain that, even here, the fetid spectre of Claude's influence could touch me. To certain more conservative elements at the university, groups that numbered among them students indigenous to Inneswich or its surrounding country, I had become an object of rather distasteful curiosity. I was avoided as "that fellow from Inneswich Priory—Claude Ashur's brother …"

When Father came down to Princeton for my commencement, Claude came with him. Looking back upon that last night in my sitting room, I realize, now, that, had we not been blinded by our wish to believe something good of Claude, Father and I should have guessed at the odious truth from the beginning. As things were, we were only too anxious to accept my brother's soft-voiced, trite lecture about having decided that he could best serve humanity through medicine. Happy for the first time in years, Father

drank in every syllable of Claude's blasphemous lies. Before he retired, he told me confidentially that he would be grateful if I advised Claude on the choice of the most suitable university. It wasn't the sort of job one looked forward to; giving advice to my brother seemed like a rather pretentious idea. I was not at all sure he wouldn't laugh at me.

I returned to the sitting room to find Claude slouched in a battered leather armchair by the fireplace. Even in the roseate glow of a log-fire, his face seemed exceptionally pallid. I remember reflecting that it was as though he were suffering a blood-draining chill; a chill that went deeper than flesh to clutch the soul in icy fingers. His eyes came up quickly as I took the chair opposite him and lit my pipe. I fancied that the ancient, cryptic malevolence of the smile he turned on me was inexplicably tinged with anxiety. It gave me rather a start, when, while I was still searching for a proper approach to the subject, he said, softly:

"I've already decided on the college, you know …"

"Well … No … I didn't know …"

"Yes …" Quite suddenly the opaque cold eyes glinted with quiet cunning. In that moment I should have sensed the malefic import of Claude's choice. I confess I felt nothing but a vague uneasy puzzlement at his next words. "I've decided to go to Miskatonic University …"

He spoke the name with an unusually resonant clarity, and as he did, I saw again the unwonted hint of anxiety that seethed behind his reserved smiling mask. One would have said that Claude was afraid I might recognize that name; that it bore some corrupt connotation of which he hoped I was ignorant. Almost imperceptibly, when I asked where Miskatonic was located and what sort of reputation it had, he relaxed. In sibilant, strangely hypnotic tones, he drew a pleasant picture of a well-endowed college, abounding in charming tradition, nestled in the domed hills of Arkham, in Northern New England. He did not speak, that night, of what obnoxious horrors lay hidden within the ivy-strangled walls of the Library of Miskatonic. He told his fetching lies with brilliant ease. And, despite the warning voice of danger that had nagged me from the outset, in the end I sanctioned Claude's choice. For, watching the frozen, grinning determination of his face, I knew I could never change his mind.

That first year at Miskatonic was a brilliant success; Claude's grades were so far above average as to exact an enthusiastic, complimentary letter from the Dean of Men. I remember how the pallor of doubt ebbed from Father's face as he read that message; there was a child-like pride in the way he

handed it to me. I myself was inordinately pleased by this unqualified praise of Claude; the apprehension that had tortured me all that year began to melt away. Then, I read the list of subjects in which my brother had excelled, and the warm glow of the library hearth seemed to smother suddenly under an intangible, chill blanket of corruption. “Medieval Lore; Ancient Cults and Sects; History of Necromancy; Examination of Extant Literature on Witchcraft.” The vile titles floated, smiling evilly, in the shadowed corners of the room. It was then that I realized the gross impudence, the monstrous significance of Claude’s selection of Miskatonic University.

In his second year at Miskatonic, Claude came home for the Christmas holidays. He had been at the Priory only three days when Father suffered a sudden and irreparable relapse.

It was the argument that brought it on. I was passing the half-open library door when I heard Father’s voice. I turned in at the threshold, my cold-stiffened face already wreathed in a holiday grin; then, I stopped. They had not heard me. Father sat slumped in a chair by his reading-table; in the lamplight his mouth looked twisted, his eyes anxious. A sickly pallor coated his parchment-dry skin. Claude, his back to me, stared silently at the raw orange corpse of a dying log in the fireplace.

“Claude …” My father spoke, as though some insupportable burden crushed his chest. “You must try to understand …”

“I understand,” Claude’s voice was barely audible, yet brutally hard.

“No … You don’t …” Father waved an ineffectual, blue-veined hand. “You’ve got to see that I’m doing this for your own good. Yes; your mother left you some money in her will—she left equal amounts to you and your brother—but, it was put in trust, to be controlled by me, until you come of age, or … or, until I die … Claude, you must stay at Miskatonic. You …”

“I tell you I’m sick of college! I’ve learned all I can, there. I’ve got to have the money! I want to travel. I want to see Tibet and China. I want to live in the Bayous and the Indies …” Abruptly, Claude spun to face Father. For the first time, I saw the feverish, seething hate, the uncontrollable rage in his eyes. I watched my father wilt before the power of an unhuman gaze. Claude’s voice rose to a demented, grinding cry. He lurched toward the cowering form in the chair. “I tell you, I’ve got to have that money!”

“Claude!”

As I stumbled into the room, bundles spilled from my arms. Tree-decorations crashed to the floor, splintering into myriad scarlet and green slivers. Claude stood frozen, only a few feet from the easy-chair. Terrified,

prayerful relief flooded the wide eyes Father turned on me. He raised that hopeless, gentle hand as though he would speak, then suddenly sank back, death-pale and senseless, against the cushions of the chair. Choking with sick fury, I brushed past Claude, and knelt at my father's side. The pulse in his withered wrist was pitifully feeble.

"Why can't you let him be?" I said hoarsely. "Why can't you get the hell out of here, and let him alone?"

"One way or the other," he said softly, "I mean to have what I want."

Only the terrible urgency of Father's condition enabled me to struggle to sanity through the cold, throttling web of terror Claude's words had woven. Almost before the library door closed behind my brother, I had rung Dr. Ellerby's number on the desk-phone. He came at once. He had grown fatter and nearly bald with the passage of years, but that night, as he prescribed a sedative and several days in bed for my father, there was in his jowly, florid visage the same impotent puzzlement I had seen there the night Mother died. In a professional matter-of-fact tone, he advised that Father should have as little excitement as possible, and all the while I could feel him thinking that, here, in this ancient Priory, throve a malady that no worldly knowledge of medicine could cure.

Doctor Ellerby called every evening; after each mechanical, forcedly-cheerful examination of his patient, he would come down to the library for a much-needed drink. I would watch the dejected slope of his shoulders, as he stood, before the casement, gazing at the winter-mauve shadows of the ash-grove. After a time, he would shake his head slowly and his voice would be heavy and beaten.

"It's so odd. I can't explain it. I've known your father ever since he came to Inneswich; he never had a blood-condition. He has none now . . . And yet, it's as though . . . well, as though, somehow, the blood were being drained from his body …"

Sometimes his words varied; their hopeless, frustrated meaning was always the same. Ellerby's tones echoed softly in some hidden corner of my brain, warping into the cold, venomous cadences of another voice. Once more I heard the brittle snapping of splintered Christmas decorations, under Claude's shifting feet. I listened as the pale spectre of him murmured that hideous warning again and again. "One way or the other, I mean to have what I want …"

It was on a sleet-chilled morning in mid-February that the letter arrived at Inneswich Priory. Addressed to Father, it was signed by one Jonathan

Wilder, Dean of Men, Miskatonic University. The expensive bond paper rustled faintly in my trembling fingers. Apprehension rose in a gelatinous tide, clogging my lungs. It was a short letter; the sentences cryptic and strangely self-conscious. They said little and yet, they hinted strongly at some darkling fear that haunted the mind of the writer. Jonathan Wilder confessed that what he had to say was not meant to be committed to paper. He said he would be grateful if Father would visit him in his office on the campus at Miskatonic, so that they might discuss in private the strange circumstances which had brought about this unfortunate turn of events in the college career of his son, Claude.

Father never saw the letter. The next Saturday, I was aboard the late evening train bound for Arkham. I lay back wearily against the dusty green Pullman seat, and stared into the square of impenetrable light that was my window. I saw nothing of the spectral landscape through which the train rattled like some phosphorescent worm crawling endlessly in the subterranean darkness of a tomb. Before my burning, sleepless eyes, only the final sentence of Jonathan Wilder's message writhed in a depraved, hypnotic *danse* macabre. "Believe me, I am indeed sorry to have to inform you that, after long deliberation, the Board of Directors can see no other course. Claude Ashur has been expelled from Miskatonic University."

IV

Jonathan Wilder was a tall, cadaverous man who tried to hide the sombre distaste in his eyes behind a blinking barrier of pince-nez. He made a bony steeple of his fingers, and, for a long time, gazed wordlessly at the barren expanses of the university campus beyond the window. His eyes studied the distant, gray coldness of the hills that hemmed in Arkham; they squinted against the icy glint of winter sun on the sluggish winding ribbon of the Miskatonic. Then, abruptly, decisively, Jonathan Wilder turned back to me. He cleared his throat.

"I do hope you'll appreciate our position in this matter, Mr. Ashur. The Board has bent over backward to be lenient with your brother; they know what a brilliant mind he has. But …" He shrugged faintly, wiping the pince-nez on the sleeve of his oxford-gray coat. "The fact is, from the very beginning Claude has shown a rather … shall we say, unwholesome? … yes … a decidedly unwholesome interest in subjects that are directly opposed to

the concepts of medical science. He has spent virtually all his time in the University Library. . . .

"You … ah … You haven't heard about the library here at Miskatonic, Mr. Ashur? … No. I see you haven't … Well, I might begin by saying that our library is reputed to contain the most extensive collection of forbidden and esoteric lore in existence today. Under lock and key, we have the only extant copies of such things as the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Juntz, and the loathsome *Book of Eibon* … Yes, even the dreadful *Necronomicon* …" I fancied that I saw an irrepressible shudder pass through Jonathan Wilder as he said those damnable names; when he spoke again, his voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Your brother, Mr. Ashur, has been seen to copy whole pages of that horrible lore. Once, long after closing hours, one of our librarians—a wholly reliable girl, I assure you—found Claude Ashur crouched in a shadowy corner among the bookstacks, muttering some weird incantation. She swore his face was … not human …" The tall man drew a long shivering breath. "There are other stories, too. There have been whisperings of strange doings in your brother's lodgings in Pickham Square. People speak of foul odors and whimpering agonized voices … Of course …" He raised one hand palm-up. "Some of this may be conjecture; possibly it's been exaggerated. But, in any case, the tales about Claude Ashur are doing Miskatonic definite harm. Enrollment has fallen off. Students have left, midterm, without apparent reason, after a short period of friendliness with your brother. You see, the esoteric learning our library affords is all very well when assimilated by a normal mind … But, a mind like Claude Ashur's …" He broke off, self-consciously. "Well … I'm sure you see our point …"

"Yes," I said, slowly. "Yes … I see …"

- - -

A man opened the door of Claude's house, his unfriendly, age-scared face stiffened at mention of the name.

"Mr. Ashur's out," he said flatly.

"I see … Well, I'll wait in his rooms …" I took a step forward and the door all but slammed in my face. The jaundiced glow of a streetlamp winked in the old man's hard, wary eyes. I got out my wallet. "It's all right. I'm his brother …" He took the dollar bill without thanking me.

"Top floor." He opened the door to let me pass.

"Thanks …" I paused. "By the way, Mr. Ashur will be leaving here tonight … for good …"

I couldn't be certain, but in the dubious glare of a garish hall light, it seemed to me that the old man's face grew suddenly soft with unspoken relief. As I moved carefully upward through the Cimmerean darkness of the stairwell, I heard him mutter, "Yes, sir!" He said it with the fervor of one who was murmuring: "Thank God!"

From the moment I entered his room, I had been vaguely aware of an indefinable odor, at once sickly-sweet and stinging in the nostrils, that seemed to permeate every corner of the room. Now, I knew I had been inhaling the pungent fumes of oily pigment mixed with turpentine. For, the thing beneath the skylight was an artist's easel, and, propped on its cross-bar, hidden by a cotton veil, was what I took to be a canvas in progress. To the right of the easel stood an antique work-cabinet, its scarred top littered with paint-clogged brushes and a pallet. Mechanically, as though driven by some mystic compulsion, I went to the table. Not until I was standing directly over it did I see the open book that lay half-buried beneath the melange of brushes and paint.

A malicious gleam from one of the lamps slanted across the tissue-fine texture of the volume-pages. A stench of immeasurable age swirled upward to me as I bent to decipher the ancient hieroglyphs that crawled like obscene insects across the paper. The book before me was one of the earliest editions of Albertus Magnus; at the bottom of the right-hand page, a single passage had been underscored. Revulsion knotted my stomach as I read those accursed lines.

"… Three drops of blood I draw from thee. The first from thy heart, the other from thy liver, the third from thy vigorous life. By this I take all thy strength, and thou losest the strife …"

Beside this medieval sorcerer's chant, on the wide, yellowed margin, Claude Ashur's spidery script confided: "There has been no news from the Priory, but I am certain the spell will work. The portrait is completed. Before long, I shall know victory; I shall have what I want …"

I cannot say for certain what wild conjectures seethed through my mind in that instant. I only know that some instinctive, fearful hatred warped my hand into the vicious claw that ripped the veil from the painting on the easel. A terrified cry snagged in my throat, and I staggered backward, staring sickly at the festering, noisome thing my brother had created. To this day, here in the white-walled sanctuary of my asylum cell, there are hideous moments in the night when I lie horrified, on the paralytic brink of sleep, while the loathsome creatures of that canvas of the damned writhe against

the dark curtains of my eyelids. I pray God no other mortal eye shall ever be seared by any such horror as I beheld that night in Pickham Square.

In the slimy colors of some subterranean spectrum, Claude Ashur had wrought cancerous images of the slobbering, gelatinous beings that lurk on the threshold of outer night. Diabolically smiling, amoebic, gangrenous creatures seethed in the shadows of that hateful canvas, and slowly, as I watched, there emerged from its crawling depths, the portrait of what once had been a man. The visage that confronted me was barely covered with discolored, maggot-eaten skin. Its blue-tinted lips were twisted in agony, and in their corrupted sockets, the eyes held a pitiful, pleading expression. Not one feature of that ruined face was whole, and yet there was something terribly familiar about it. I took an unsteady step toward the picture, then stopped. Awful suspicion reeled madly in my head as I noticed for the first time the tiny scarlet globules that oozed from that decaying skin. It was as though every pore had exuded a dew of blood!

"You always were an incurable busybody, Richard …"

Echoing icily in the dim corners of that low-ceilinged room, the sibilant hardness of the voice seemed unreal. Only when I had turned to find Claude's angular, dark-suited figure framed in the doorway, was I certain that my confused brain wasn't playing tricks on me. There was no mistaking the malevolent reality of the half-smile that curled my brother's lips. Sunken in his pallid, immobile face, onyx eyes flashed with caustic humor.

"I'm afraid my little creation gave you rather a turn," he murmured. "You know, Richard, it's always best for sensitive souls to mind their own business."

The old, impotent rage blurred my vision; Claude's venomous smile faded and grew horribly clear again. When my voice came, it was thick and ill-controlled: "You'd better do your packing, now I've made reservations on the midnight train for Inneswich …"

We reached Inneswich Priory at noon the following day. A winter storm had swept inland, and gray, needling rain made the ivy-choked walls glisten evilly. There was a fire on the library hearth; before it, Doctor Ellerby stood waiting for us. One look at his face, and the vile suspicion that had been spawned last night in that dark, narrow room blazed into putrescent reality. In that instant, I knew who had been the subject of the hellish portrait in Pickham Square. I knew my father was dead.

Claude made no display of pretended grief. He made no secret of his eagerness to have the will settled. There was whispering in the village; the

simple, superstitious people of Inneswich spoke of daemons and the consorts of hell who could laugh in the face of Death. My brother's terrible, inhuman cheerfulness became a festering legend muttered by witch-hunting nonegenarians. Only the brave, the few who had been closest to the Church and my father, attended the lonely burial service, and even they departed in haste, glancing apprehensively backward at the figure of Claude Ashur, black against the bleak and threatening sky. Two weeks after the interment, one week after the reading of the will, Claude cashed a check for the full amount of his monetary inheritance and disappeared.

V

You can make a religion of escape. You can run away from the memory of horror, and hide yourself in willful forgetfulness. You can fill your life with feverish activity that crowds out the shadows of diseased evil. I know. I did just that for nearly eight years. And, in a certain measure, I succeeded. Having acquired a modest, white-stuccoed cottage on the outskirts of a southern Jersey resort, I divided my time between it and the Priory. I made new friends. I forced myself to mingle with worldly society as I'd never done before. After a time, I was able to resume my neglected literary career. I told myself I had escaped. Actually, I was never able to pass that carven, padlocked door in the East Wing without having to suppress a nauseous chill. There were still moments when, alone in the dusk-dimmed library, I broke into a cold sweat and Claude Ashur's voice echoed demoniacally in the shadowed corners of the room. At worst, however, these terrible sensations were transient illnesses that could be cured by friendly laughter or concentrated creative work. Somewhere, I knew, the malign genius of my brother still existed, but I hoped and slowly grew to believe that he had passed out of my life forever. I never spoke his name. I knew and wanted to know nothing about him. Only once, in all those years, did I have any direct news of Claude.

By a lucky chance my first book excited friendly interest among certain groups, and I found myself on the invitation lists of the literati. I attended countless cocktail parties and dinners, and it was at one such soirée that I met Henry Boniface. He was a small man, almost effeminate, with a sandy top-knot and straggling beard to match. He shook my hand timidly, but I fancied a sudden brightness in his pale eyes as he repeated my name. I wanted to get away from him. Thinking of what my hostess had said of

Henry Boniface as she guided me toward him through the crowd, I felt a sudden oppressive apprehension close in upon me. He was a surrealist painter who just returned from the West Indies, and, a few years back, he had taught at Miskatonic University.

"Ashur," his soft, persistent voice murmured. "But, of course! I knew I'd heard that name!" That odd, brilliant interest blinked in his eyes again. "You must be Claude Ashur's brother. . . ."

For years no one had referred to me in that manner. The loathsome phrase whispered in my head maliciously. Claude Ashur's brother. The sound of it seemed to throw open some tremendous portal within me; all the ancient deliberately forgotten terror swelled in my chest like a rising, slimy tide. "Yes," I said thickly. "That's right …"

It seemed to me that Boniface's gaze narrowed, biting into my face. His tone was light, diffident, but mercilessly probing. "I suppose you haven't heard from Claude in some time? No. I daresay not. Well, in that case, I have a bit of news for you …"

I wanted to tell him to shut up, to quit opening old cancerous sores with his rotten chatter. I only stared at him.

"Yes … The fact is, I heard about Claude while I was in the Indies. Amazing. He was always a most amazing fellow. I knew him quite well while he was at Miskatonic. He was in one of my art classes. Said he wanted to learn to paint so that he could do some sort of portrait …"

Cold beads of perspiration coated my palms. The worm-eaten monstrosity of Pickham Square reeled evilly in my brain. Henry Boniface droned on.

"But, to get back to the Indies. The blacks there told me of a white man who was living in the back-country among their witch-doctors, studying voodoo. Seems he'd wormed his way into their confidence. He'd been admitted into the cult and took part in all those repulsive doings at the *humfortt*. They … ah … They said his name was Claude Ashur …" Boniface shook his tiny head slowly. "Amazing. Extraordinary fellow, indeed. What strikes me is how he can go on living there in immunity. He was never what you'd call robust, was he? And there are all sorts of horribly fatal diseases in the back-country … It's a miracle he's alive."

I felt a hard smile curl the stiffness of my lips. "Don't worry about Claude," I said bitterly. "He has a tremendous will to live. Nothing will kill him …"

The words fell flat and cold between us, and after a moment of awkward silence, I excused myself, leaving Henry Boniface to stare after me with

those bird-bright, curious eyes. I never saw him again, but more than once in the horror-ridden years that followed, my mind reached back through limitless dark to the night I uttered that damnable prophecy. “Nothing will kill him.” Had I realized then the corrupt truth of those words, I might have saved Gratia Thane—and myself. I might have destroyed Claude Ashur before he was beyond destruction.

Early in October, 1926, I returned once more to the monastic quiet of Inneswich Priory, intending to pass the winter there, and complete the last chapters of my second book. After so extended a period of freedom from my brother’s influence, the Priory had to all intents and purposes reverted to kind. It had become again the sequestered, peaceful home I had known in early childhood. Settled down to work, living comfortably but simply, I was almost happy. My second novel was never finished. Less than a month after my arrival at the Priory, I received the letter:

> *My dear Richard*:
>
> *I know that you hoped never to hear from me again. I’m indeed sorry to disappoint you. But, the fact is, the prodigal has grown weary of wandering, and is ready to come home. And, much as you might dislike the idea, you can’t deny your devoted brother his right to live in the ancestral manse, can you? Be so good as to prepare one of the better bedchambers, Richard. The blue one in the West Wing would be ideal. For, you see, I’m not returning as I left—alone. I’m bringing home my bride.*

In the week that followed the arrival of Claude’s letter, the news had spread with awesome rapidity, and fear had flowered anew in the shadows of Inneswich, blooming like some malignant cancer whose growth had been hidden for a while, but never checked. Wild conjecture muttered from street to street. Who was this creature Claude Ashur had married? What could she be like? There were predictions that murmured of a woman of strange and evil beauty; there were hints at a reincarnation of the hell-spawned witch Jabez Dreisen had burned at the stake more than a century ago. Long before they had ever seen her, the people of Inneswich were haunted by an abject fear of my brother’s life. I too was growing strangely fearful of the nameless woman who was Claude’s bride. I had finished the sixth brandy before I sprang to my feet at the sound of a car turning into the Priory drive.

Memories of that night have always returned to me in fitful, nightmarish segments, haunting impressions that flash brilliantly in some secret crevice

of the brain then fade once more into the cloying yellow mist of remembered horror. I hear again the metallic summons of the wrought-iron knocker echoing through the darkened halls of the Priory. I recall a faint rustle of clothes and the housekeeper's awed murmur: "Mister Richard is in the library." I remember turning to face the door. Then, Claude Ashur stood on the threshold. He had changed. He seemed taller than when last I'd seen him. The aquiline face was paler and more emaciated, and yet it had taken on a certain regularity of feature that made it handsome in a striking, sardonic way. Claude, as I remembered him, had always been pointedly negligent of his attire. Now, his expensive, well-cut tweeds, soft-collared shirt and knitted tie were in the best of taste. He moved easily across the room toward me; his hand in mine was abnormally cold. He smiled.

"Richard, old man! It's been a long time!"

The casual heartiness of his tone gave me a start. In that moment, I decided that, if Claude had lived in the hideous back-country of the Indies, he had also spent some time in Europe. For that sibilantly powerful voice had taken on a very definite Continental cadence. He spoke with a faintly Germanic accent.

"Sorry we're so late. The trains, you know. They're always so …" He must have seen that I wasn't listening; my gaze had gone beyond him to the library doorway. His face vaguely puzzled, he turned, and then smiled again. "Ah … Gratia, my dear …"

I had never seen anyone like Gratia Thane. Her face was a softly squared oval framed by wind-blown auburn hair that emphasized the soft whiteness of her skin. A hesitant smile touched the corners of full, perfectly-rouged lips, and as she came nearer, I saw that the rather wide-set eyes were sloe-black and strangely docile. The traveling tweeds she wore couldn't conceal the exquisite grace of her carriage. She stood only a few feet from me now. Her eyes had not left my face for a moment. As though from a great distance, I heard Claude's quiet laughter.

"Well, my dear? Aren't you going to say 'hello' to Richard?"

As the dark eyes swung slowly to meet Claude's, they underwent a remarkably subtle change. In the flickering amber glow of the fire, they seemed to grow suddenly warmer; they caressed Claude's face with a kind of hypnotic, voiceless adoration. Only when my brother had given her a barely perceptible nod of assent did Gratia turn back to me. I took her extended hand in mine. When she spoke, her voice was throaty and beautifully

modulated, but she said the words with the diffident air of a little girl who has learned her lesson well.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Richard …"

I cannot recall my mumbled reply. I know that the moment those warm, soft fingers touched mine an unwonted, boyish confusion swelled in my throat. For a time, I only stared at the loveliness of Gratia Thane, and then, suddenly realizing that I had held her hand too long, I let it go. I think I flushed. I was conscious of Claude's steady scrutiny of my face, and when I looked at him, I saw the tight, malicious curl of his lips. All the old, corrupt malevolence was in that smile. I knew, then, that despite his Continental manner, Claude Ashur hadn't really changed.

The dinner was not a success. I was frightened. It was strange, selfless fear that turned cold inside me, as I sat, pretending to eat, and studied Gratia Thane. Time and again, I saw that childlike devotion soften her lovely face; she never failed to smile when Claude chanced to look her way. It was a gentle, worshiping smile, and still, the longer I watched it, the more convinced I was that it was a mask—a mask that could not quite hide the mute, unutterable weariness that crept into her eyes in unguarded moments. I was no longer afraid of my brother's wife; I was afraid *for* her. I was haunted by the feeling that, somehow, the subtle, cancerous evil that had followed Claude Ashur since birth was reaching out its vile, slime-coated tentacles to claim this girl, to destroy her as it had destroyed everything it ever touched. And, quite suddenly, I knew I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want anything to happen to Gratia. She was the loveliest woman I had ever known.

After Claude and Gratia had climbed the wide staircase, disappearing into the gloom of the upper hallway, I didn't retire immediately. I went back to the cold hearth and poured myself a stiff drink from the decanter. The liquor didn't warm me. I felt tired and confused, but I knew that if I went to bed, I wouldn't sleep. I don't know how long I sat slumped in the chair by the lifeless grate. I lost count of the drinks I poured. I lost touch with everything but the pale, frightened image that floated before my closed eyes—the image of Gratia Thane.

The shadow-shrouded corners of the room closed in upon me, and through the French casements seething, icy fog swirled as though no earthy barrier could stop it. Terror clutched at my chest as slowly, out of the blinding, jaundiced mist there emerged two wavering figures. Horror warped Gratia's face, wrenching all beauty from it. Her lips parted as though she would

scream, but, no sound came. Madly she stumbled through the scum-coated labyrinths of outer darkness, and at her heels, its saturnine laughter shrieking in her ears, ran the swollen, slime-dripping thing that was Claude Ashur. The running feet thrummed rhythmically, like the sacrificial drums of some demon-worshiping tribe. Nearer, they beat. Nearer. Nearer.

I thought I was still dreaming. Cold sweat-beads crawled from the hair in my armpits along the sides of my body. My hands trembled. My eyes were open. Gradually, the familiar, shadowy objects of the library came into focus. But, the hellish throbbing of those ceremonial drums did not stop! For one horrible moment, I doubted my own sanity. Then, slowly, painfully, my numbed limbs obeyed the orders of my brain. I stumbled unsteadily to the darkened threshold of the library, and, clutching at the door for support, I knew that what I heard was no product of a diseased imagination. No one could deny the ghastly reality of the rhythmic sound that swelled like some obscene heartbeat in the blackness of the stairwell.

It came from the chamber in the East Wing. Even before my uncertain legs had carried me up the endless hill of the stair, I knew where I was going. With each step the demoniac thrumming grew louder, crashing madly against the walls of the high, narrow corridor that led to the East Wing. My lips were dry; breath made a rasping sound in my throat. For an incalculable moment, I stood staring at the rust-coated padlock that hung open on the latch of that hateful, carven portal. The doorknob was cold in my clammy grasp. The heathen tattoo of the drums exploded like thunder against my eardrums, as the door swung inward without a sound.

My brother, seated cross-legged on the floor with his back to the door, was swathed in the folds of a scarlet cloak. It was his bloodless hands, stretched outward, to the slimy skins of weirdly-painted native tomtoms, that beat out that hypnotic rhythm of the damned. In an ancient sacrificial brazier which stood between him and Gratia, glowed the blue-white flame that was the only light in the room; with each turgid heart-throb of the drums, the tongue of fire hissed and flared to unholy brightness. And, in that eerie, pulsating luminescence, I saw the change that had come over Claude's bride.

The pallid face that seemed to float in a phosphorescent nimbus was no longer that of Gratia Thane. The soft oval had grown suddenly angular; wan, dry skin stretched tautly over high cheek-bones. The eyes I remembered as wide and innocent had sunken into shadow-tinged sockets and turned oddly bright and crafty. Her mouth was a thin, bloodless gash that curled bitterly at the corners. It was a face that tainted the virginal loveliness of her white-

gowned body. And, even as I watched, the horrible change grew more and more profound. At every thud of the tom-toms, wiser, subtler evil gleamed from those wary eyes.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, while I stood horror-frozen in the doorway, the erotic thrumming had been muted. Now, above the distant rumbling, there rose a thin, godless wail that was more animal than human. Alien syllables, tumbling from Claude Ashur's parted lips, burst in the gloom like poisonous tropical flowers; the unholy tones of his incantation flowed through the stagnant air like pus that drained from a lanced abscess.

I saw the face that had been Gratia's grow tense. A caustic, horribly familiar grin warped the lips, and slowly, as a snake weaves to the mesmeric rhythm of the charmer's pipe, the firm white body swayed in time with the ghastly threnody Claude Ashur chanted. Then, abruptly, the shrill wild voice rose, and strangely accented but recognizable words trembled in the putrescent shadows of the room.

"Be gone, O will more frail than mine! Be gone, and leave me room! Gratia Thane is cast out, and this flesh belongs to me! Through these eyes shall I see; through these fingertips shall I feel. Through these lips I shall speak! Speak! Speak!"

The furious command whined coldly above the drums. The flame in the brazier snapped and leapt high. And, staring into its blue-white depths, Gratia was suddenly still. Only pale lips moved in the expressionless mask of her face. The voice that came was calm and sibilant; it was the soft voice of a man who spoke with just the hint of a Germanic accent!

"This body is mine. Henceforth, this flesh is the house of my spirit. Claude Ashur. I am Claude Ashur! I am! I …"

"Gratia!" Her name was an anguished cry in my fear-dried throat.

"Claude . . ." The bewildered murmur trembled on Gratia's lips. The hideous gauntness, the unhealthy eye-shadows had faded from her face, leaving it flushed and gentle. Her gaze moved slowly from Claude to me, and the frightened puzzlement behind her warm, dark eyes was that of a child awakened in a strange room. "Richard . . . Where are we? What's happened? I feel so weak, I …"

Her voice trailed off in a husky sigh; the tenseness drained from her body. The filmy white gown rustled faintly as she slid forward to the floor and lay still. I was the first to reach her. Her hand was icy in mine and coated with a clammy dew. I think I whispered her name and cradled her in my arms.

Then, I became conscious of the shadow that was Claude Ashur looming over us.

"I'll take care of my wife, Richard." The familiar, stony calm had returned to his voice. I stared up into the colorless mask that was his face. In the glow of the guttering brazier-flame, it seemed to me that his pallid skin was spotted with faint, brownish blotches. I said thickly:

"We'd better get a doctor …"

"She'll be all right …"

"But …"

"She's only fainted," Claude said levelly. "She needs rest. I'll take her to her room …"

As she passed me, the cool whiteness of Gratia's gown whispered against my hand. I listened to the funereal murmur of his tread moving away down the corridor. Bewildered fear shuddered within me at each breath I drew. I wanted a drink. I stood staring into the phosphorescent glow of the brazier. A confused impulse to get to a telephone and call Dr. Ellerby swelled in me and died. I didn't move. Somewhere, in the seething tenebrosity of that chamber a hateful echo grew suddenly shrill and distinct. I heard again the sibilant, accented voice that had spoken with Gratia Thane's lips. "… This flesh is the house of my spirit. Claude Ashur. I am Claude Ashur."

I started violently at the sound of his laughter. Turning, I saw him standing once more on the threshold of that loathsome chamber. The tawny facial stains I had noted before were very pronounced, now; his face was scarcely more than a skull enshrouded by dry, unpigmented skin, and he seemed to breathe with difficulty. But, his rage had subsided into bland secrecy again. The old, cat-like smile had come back. The brilliant eyes laughed mirthlessly.

"Poor Richard. Really, you must learn not to intrude if you're going to continue being your old squeamish self. . . ." There was an undercurrent of warning in the bantering tone. It stirred boiling coals of anger that seared across the chilled numbness of my terror. I had a fleeting vision of Gratia's weary, child-like face. Fury made my voice harsh.

"What are you doing to her, Claude?"

He didn't answer immediately. He sank into the chair Gratia had occupied, and, for a long moment, did nothing but stare into the white-hot heart of the dancing flame. I saw the smile rebend his lips; an obscene light flickered in the shadowed depths of his eye-sockets.

"She's really quite exquisite, isn't she?" he said softly.

I said: “She’s decent. She’s a fine person and you’re doing something to her. I want to know what’s behind all this rotten display. . . .”

“Do you?” The seering gaze flashed up to meet mine. “Do you really, Richard? Are you sure you want to know? Are you sure it wouldn’t offend your tender sensibilities?

“The lovely lady has inspired you, my dear Richard. She’s made you a knight in shining armor.” Abruptly, the lips drew into a taut line. “If I were you, I’d give up the notion of ‘rescuing’ the lady Gratia. You see, what you so vulgarly refer to as a ‘rotten display’ is really a scientific experiment. Gratia is my assistant. I’ve no intention of giving her up. She’s the perfect subject. Perhaps that’s because she’s so completely in love with me. . . .”

Claude must have sensed the revulsion that shuddered through me at the foul suggestiveness of his tone. The taunting smile returned and he nodded slowly.

“Yes. My wife is quite devoted, Richard. That’s why my experiments have been so successful. You see, I believe that, under proper conditions, a will that is powerful enough can take over the body of another person—transplanting its dominant personality in fresh soil, as it were—forcing the other person to exchange bodies with it. It requires only concentration and a suitable subject; one that is highly susceptible to the will of the experimenter. . . .” Claude’s eyes had grown maniacally bright as he spoke. Now, he breathed each word as though it were some heathen incantation. “I’ve found that subject …”

“You can’t,” I said dully. “You can’t do this to Gratia. She’s lovely. She …”

“That’s just the point!” Claude’s voice was a feverish whisper. “Lovely! She’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. Think, Richard! Think what I could do with such loveliness. Think of a woman possessed of such beauty, and of my personality, my brain directing that beauty! A woman such as that could rule any man … a million men … an empire … a world!”

I struggled to keep my voice level. “I tell you, you can’t do it. I won’t let you. I know your ‘experiments.’ I know what they did to Father and Tam! Well, you’re not going to hurt Gratia. Either you’ll let her alone or I’ll go to the police!”

“No, Richard,” he said softly. “You won’t go to the police. In a little while, you’ll grow calm; you’ll think. And, then, you’ll realize the truth of what I told you about Gratia. She is entirely mine. She would never support any insane stories you might tell the authorities. On the contrary, if you

should talk, she would readily agree with my testimony that you were quite mad."

He went out, closing the door soundlessly behind him.

VI

There was nothing I could do. Like an outsider, I stood by and watched while Claude Ashur's malignant genius slowly, inevitably reclaimed Inneswich Priory. By the end of the first week, I had grown to feel like some helpless intruder who has stumbled upon unspeakable horror and dares do nothing but turn his back. My nerves were like the strings of a sensitive instrument, keyed to the breaking point. Day by day I watched Gratia move through the gloom-infested hallways of the Priory; I saw the growing pallor of her gentle face; I saw the sickly fear that lurked behind the shallow mask of her eyes. Time and again, I set out upon walks that I meant to end in the local constabulary, but, I could never escape the horrible rationality of Claude's warning.

In the night, I would start awake, trembling on the brink of mad rage, as the pulsing of drums thundered through the cavern of the house; always, after such nights, there was a marked improvement, a new vitality in my brother and Gratia seemed more wan, more silent than ever. I knew that the girl who drifted, wraithlike, from room to room, smiling obediently, adoringly at Claude, was not the real Gratia. I was convinced that she was controlled, that her voiceless devotion to Claude was a manifestation of some hideous form of mesmerism. But, I had no way of proving my theory. It is probable that I should never have known the real Gratia Thane, had it not been for the fever.

It came upon Claude quite suddenly toward the middle of the third week. The day had been overcast and unpleasantly cold; a sea-dampness had seeped into the massive Priory rooms, settling upon them a chill that no fire could dispel. Claude had spent the afternoon locked in his East Wing chamber, and when he appeared for dinner, it occurred to me that his wan face was tinted with an unwonted flush; his eyes were red-rimmed and oddly ill-at-ease when they chanced to meet mine. More than once during the oppressive silent course of the meal I saw Gratia's worried gaze seeking his. He didn't look at her. Directly after dinner, he retired.

It was well past midnight before I drifted into a fitful doze; for hours, I had puzzled over the strange silence of my brother. Since that first night of

his return, the evil in Claude had grown into a bold, bantering thing that throve on barbed innuendo and secret, poisonous laughter. I wondered what had caused the change. The answer came in the form of a misty presence that floated at my bedside, like some troubled spirit. I think I must have cried out at the touch of a cool hand on my arm, for soft fingertips pressed warningly against my lips. Breathing heavily, I stared up into the moon-washed loveliness of Gratia Thane's face.

"Richard …" There was a timid urgency in her throaty whisper. "Richard, you must come … I'm afraid … I …" She fought to still the trembling of her lips. "It's Claude. I heard him moaning. It was horrible. He's in his bedroom … and he won't let me in … I'm afraid, Richard, he's ill … I feel it … We … we've got to do something for him …"

As I watched the wide darkness of Gratia's eyes, heard the mixture of anxiety and terror that throbbed in her voice, an odd thrill of hope shot through me. The girl who stood by my bed in that moment was no longer the will-less automaton I had come to know. For the first time since I'd met her, Gratia Thane was honestly, tremblingly alive. Her palm was moist against mine as we made our way through the Cimmerean blackness of the upper hall; I cannot say how long we stood before the door of Claude's bedchamber, listening, and scarcely breathing. I can only remember the sudden, terrified vise of her fingers on mine, when, from beyond the heavy oaken panels, there came a muted, agonized groan. I clutched the icy metal latch and twisted it sharply, throwing the ponderous door ajar.

The wild howl that rent the stillness then was not one of pain; it was the vicious snarl of an outraged animal. For one terrible instant, I beheld, thrown into ghastly relief upon Claude's bedstead, the fever-bright eyes, the blotched skin, the raw scar-of-a-mouth that had uttered that fury-torn cry. I heard Gratia gasp. Then, violently, Claude Ashur turned from us, twisting in the bed until we could see nothing but the frail mound of his body beneath the covers.

"Get out! Get out of this room and stay out!"

"Claude … you're ill … You've got to let us help you …" Gratia took a hesitant forward step.

"Stay away from me!" the voice commanded in a harsh whisper. "I told you not to come in here. I want to be left alone!"

I said levelly: "You'd better let me call Ellerby, Claude."

"No! I don't need a doctor! I don't need anyone! It's nothing, I tell you. Just a recurrence of a fever I had in the tropics. It'll pass. Just leave me

alone! Alone!”

It was no different in the morning. Despite his wife’s repeated entreaties, Claude stubbornly refused to let anyone enter his room. I stood by, silent, listening while Gratia begged him to be reasonable—to call in a doctor. He spoke only once in a quiet, desperate voice. He instructed her to have his food left on trays outside the door; he told her everything would be quite all right in a few days. After that, there was no answer to Gratia’s anxious pleadings. There was only an occasional soft rustling beyond the bolted door, and the nauseous odor of putrefaction that seemed to grow more foul by the minute. As he always had, Claude Ashur won. We left him alone. The door to his hateful sanctuary remained closed for more than a week, and, as time passed, I began to entertain a strange hope that at once horrified and thrilled me. I began to wonder how it would be if that door never opened again.

That week was a jungle flower that blossomed with pitifully brief magnificence in the midst of a fungus-choked swamp of evil. It was the only beautiful thing born of those final hideous days at Inneswich Priory. It was a brilliant tender touch of normalcy caught in a cesspool of malignant madness. For, in those few hours, I came to know the true Gratia Thane. Set free of the vile will that lay prisoner in that upper chamber, she became the girl I’d always known she must be; a gentle creature, full of gay laughter, and quiet tenderness; a carefree child who loved to run along the white stretches of the beach with the salt air brushing her cheek, and ruffling the bronze softness of her hair; a Gratia who, despite the lingering shadow of Claude Ashur, soon endeared herself to those villagers she chanced to meet on the evening walks that became our habit. It was as though some dark curtain that had separated her from reality, that had let her see only Claude, had been lifted. And, watching the lovely aliveness of her face, listening to her warm laughter, feeling the excitement of her hand in mine, I knew that I was in love with my brother’s wife.

The curtain fell again. As suddenly as I had found Gratia, I lost her. On the evening of the ninth day, Claude reclaimed his bride. Gratia and I had been playing backgammon in the library window seat; I remember the way the dying amber rays of the sun glinted in her eyes when she laughed almost tenderly at my run of ill-luck. And, I remember how the laughter died, so abruptly, so completely. I looked up from the game and saw the blood drain from the warm mounds of her cheeks; the dark wells of her eyes grew suddenly shallow and secretive; her pallid lips moved, but no words came. A

faint sibilant rustle made me start and turn my head. And, then, I saw it—standing in the gloom that shrouded the library threshold—the smiling, animated corpse that was Claude Ashur.

In that wasted visage, only the curled gash of the mouth and the pitted blazing eyes gave testimony to the corrupt flame of life that still burned within that fleshless body. The dry, achromatic skin of the massive forehead seemed swollen, and the hairline had receded markedly. The unwholesome brown splotches had disappeared, leaving the facial flesh seamed and sallow. A heavy, dark-colored scarf was muffled about his throat, and (oddest of all, I thought), pale, kidskin gloves covered his hands. From that day forward, I never saw Claude without them.

"Well!" The twisted lips scarcely moved, but his soft, insinuating voice held all the old malicious humor. "This is a most touching little domestic scene …" Shifting in their sockets, the seering pin-points of fire ate into the wan softness of Gratia's face. "I'm sure Richard has been a charming substitute, my dear, but really … Shouldn't you be just a bit more enthusiastic about your husband's recovery?"

With the hypnotic grace of a delicately-wrought puppet, Gratia rose from the window-seat; her pale hand brushed against the game-board, and several scarlet backgammon pieces spilled to the carpet. She didn't notice them. Slowly, she crossed the dusk-dimmed room to where Claude stood. Her firm, bare arms went around his neck and, passionately, she kissed the ugly wound that was his mouth. For a long time, they stood embracing in the shadows, and all the while, over Gratia's shoulder, my brother's evil face smiled at me. That night, I heard the drums again.

I thought I'd had a nightmare. A moment before, the demoniac thrumming had been pounding against my eardrums, throbbing in the depths of the nighted Priory. But, when I started up from my sweaty pillow, peering into the dark that swarmed in upon me, abruptly, the sound was gone. I sat forward, taut and waiting. The silence was profound, limitless; the silence of the tomb. It was as though some titanic heart-beat had been suddenly stilled. I tried to relax. I passed a clammy hand over my forehead, and attempted a laugh. There was nothing but a dry rasping in my throat. Determinedly, I lay back; I told myself I was letting my nerves get the better of me.

It didn't work; the longer I lay there, forcing my icy hands to stillness, listening tensely to every silken, uncertain whisper of the night, the more conscious I became of the caul of impending danger that had spread its slimy veil over Inneswich Priory. The silence was unnatural; it was the seething

quietness of the demented killer before he strikes. Cursing my nerves, I threw back the counterpane and struggled into robe and slippers. Clammy air swirled about my bare ankles as I opened the bedroom door and ventured warily into the Stygian gloom of the corridor. Instinctively, I turned in the direction of the East Wing. Through the single massive casement of the upper hall, moonlight fell, making a pale, shadow-latticed desert of the floor. It was as I passed through that livid pool of moonglow that I saw her.

"Gratia!"

She seemed not to hear; as she came toward me from the shadows, her white gown murmured. It was like the warning hiss of a poisonous snake. I stared at the hueless angularity of her wasted face. The deep-set eyes burned into mine and the narrow slit that was her mouth twisted in a sardonic smile. Her tongue, pink and strangely pointed, flicked out to moisten dry lips. The mouth worked.

"Kill!" it whispered in the accented, venomous voice that didn't belong to Gratia Thane. "I must kill … It's the only way … The sure way … He could cause trouble … It's best this way … Yes … He must be destroyed. Killed … Kill! Kill! Kill!"

I caught her waist as a knife slashed downward toward my chest; razor-edged steel grazed my left cheek; I felt blood trickle along my jaw. It wasn't easy to hold her; she struggled with a vicious strength that was out of keeping with the fragility of her body . . . with the power of a desperate madman. The colorless lips curled back from her teeth.

"You!" she hissed. "I must kill you! Kill! Destroy! Silence forever!"

"Gratia!" I shook her violently. "Stop it! You hear me? Cut it out!"

There was the flat, brutal slap of my hand across her hysteria-twisted face, and suddenly, she was still. Insane anger melted into bewilderment; her eyes widened and gained warmth and depth; the shadows faded. Gratia's lips, pink and moist, trembled. For an instant, she could only stare; her terrified gaze moved from the flesh-wound of my face to the glinting blade of the knife she still held. She gasped. I saw her fingers open convulsively; the knife thudded to the floor. Again, our eyes met, and then she was in my arms.

"Richard … Rick, I didn't mean to … I didn't know what I was doing … He made me … It was the drums … and his voice … Here … here in my head …"

The fresh perfume of her hair was in my nostrils; her cheek brushed mine. Gently, she was wiping the blood from my face with the sleeve of her gown.

"It's all right," I murmured. "It's all right, now …"

I held her close again; her body was trembling. She cried. It was the soft, bewildering cry of a little girl.

"I'm scared. Rick, I'm so scared! He's doing something to me … He's …" She shook her head frantically and clung to me. "Don't let him … Please … You won't let him! Promise you won't let him …"

"No." My voice sounded flat and hard in my own ears. "He won't hurt you … He won't hurt you ever again …"

"The triumph of true love!"

Bitter, weighted with sarcasm, the softly spoken words seemed to tear Gratia from my arms. Standing on the edge of the shadows, his eyes slitted in their blue-black wells, the desiccated flesh of his face more livid than ever in the moonlight, Claude Ashur laughed.

"You can't have her. You know that, don't you, Richard? I've tried to be patient with you; but, I'm afraid you've interfered once too often. You see, Gratia is more than a woman and wife to me. She's my very life; my one hope of survival. I'll never let you take that hope from me …"

He had begun to move slowly toward me through the moonlight; each stride had a fluid, evil grace that was almost feline. The brilliant gaze flashed to where Gratia stood, then back to me. Again, briefly, that loathsome smiled toyed with the corners of his mouth.

"You don't quite understand, do you, my dear brother? You're wondering how Gratia could be my sole hope of survival. No matter. It's better that you never know. We don't want to trouble your sensitive mind on your last night in this life. Indeed, no! We want you to be at peace. We want you to be ready —for death!"

What happened then I cannot clearly remember; the murderous violence of those few minutes returns only in disparate snatches. I recall the maniacal force of Claude's lunge, the cold, bony vise of his fingers closing on my windpipe. I think I heard Gratia scream. That pale, hateful face was horribly close to mine; his putrid breath hissed, hot against my skin. I remember crashing backward under the impact of his charge. Darkness and moonlight spun in my head. I thought my lungs would burst. Then, by some desperate, instinctive twist of the body, I was free. Wind rasped in my chest. I had Claude crushed between me and the damp stone wall. My fingers clamped in his hair, jolting his head forward and back viciously. When his skull pounded against the stone for the third time, his frenzied grasp relaxed. He slid to the floor at my feet, twitched once, and was still.

He wasn't dead. With the brilliant eyes shuttered by blank, purplish lids, the pale waste of his face had every aspect of death, but, under my searching hand, his evil heart still pounded feebly. Mechanically, possessed of a strange, decisive calm, I bound him hand and foot with the heavy sash-cords of the window-drapes. I carried him to his room and laid him on the huge antique bedstead. I locked him in.

Gratia had stopped crying, but her hand was cold and trembling in mine as we descended through the chill darkness to the library. I talked, then; I told her gently that there was nothing more to be afraid of; I said it was all over now. I built a fire and poured drinks for both of us. And, the whole time, a single, inescapable thought coursed with harrowing persistence beneath my outward calm. I knew that, for the safety of everyone concerned, there was only one place for Claude Ashur: the State Asylum for the Criminally Insane. When I had finished my drink, I made two telephone calls. I asked Dr. Ellerby and the police to come to Inneswich Priory as quickly as possible.

VII

It was all handled very quietly. None of the facts got into the papers. The few reporters whose editors sent them to cover the trial were refused admission. They returned, disgruntled, to their respective phone booths and dictated brief, barren items that only hinted at the abominable truth; these articles, if printed at all, were mercifully swallowed by some obscure corner of an inner page. For a while, the newspaper men tried another angle. They spent a good deal of time in the Tavern at Inneswich; they asked questions. They learned nothing. The people of the village, perhaps out of respect for the memory of my father, met all inquiries with a cold stare and locked lips. So, the loathsome secret of Inneswich Priory, the shame that had scummed the name of Ashur, remained hidden beyond a barrier of clement silence.

The only formal charge against Claude Ashur was one of assault with intent to kill. I stood in the witness box and muttered the details of his attempt on my life. That was all I had to do. The alienists did the rest. It wasn't difficult. It was simply a matter of subjecting Claude to countless cross-examinations; of recording the awed, reluctant testimony of various villagers who knew of my brother's "oddity"; of questioning the timid, uneasy man who was Dean of Men at Miskatonic University, and reading a letter from one Henry Boniface, who had taught Claude Ashur to paint.

The strange, exalted manner in which Claude accepted Father's death was brought to light, and, in the end, I admitted the story of that odious portrait in Pickham Square, and the murder-incantation of Albertus Magnus. In mid-September, 1925, the alienists reached a decision. They declared my brother incurably insane.

On that last day of his examination, I went alone to the State Asylum; alone, I felt the final, brutal impact of his hate-filled unblinking stare, and glimpsed again the cold anger of the calculating mind that lay hidden behind that emaciated mask. He showed no signs of hysteria or violence. Between white-coated attendants, he walked quietly to the doorway of the consultation room. Then he turned, and, for an instant, his face gray in the gloom of a rainy afternoon, the features somehow broadened and blurred, he was again the old, cynically smiling, indestructible Claude.

"You mustn't suppose that you've won, Richard," he said softly. "You mustn't delude yourself. They can lock me up. They can bolt doors and bar windows. But they can never imprison the real Claude Ashur. I'll be free again. Some day, some how, I'll reach out to you—to you and my devoted wife. Sooner or later, I'll have my revenge." His muted laughter whispered through tight lips. "You don't believe that, now. But you will. Wait, Richard … Just wait, and see …"

I tried to listen to the quiet reassurances of the doctors; I saw my brother disappear around a bend in the corridor; I heard a door opened and closed. The metallic grind of bolts drifted back to me through the dimness. I told myself that Claude had gone out of my life forever. But I didn't believe it. That last, soft-spoken warning echoed ceaselessly in my head; I had the terrible conviction that this was not the end of Claude Ashur.

The semblance of contentment which settled over Inneswich Priory was a thing born of our desperate need for peace of mind. The happiness wasn't real. It was as though our determination to shut out the hideous past had pushed back a musty drapery of gloom, letting in the feeble, timorous sunlight of normalcy. In the next months, I saw Gratia slowly reclaim the young, fresh vitality I'd first known to be a part of her during the week of Claude's illness. She laughed again; she walked with me along the winter-bleak strand of the beach; she planned little surprises in the way of food delicacies; and it was she who finally convinced me that I should go back to my writing.

Had anyone asked us, I know we should have said we were quite happy. It would have been a lie. I wrote; but the several literary articles I managed

were somehow weak; they lacked spontaneity. The prose was stunted and overcast with a strange uneasiness. Gratia and I made plans. We talked of travel and marriage, but there was always a ghost of unrest that hovered between us—the knowledge that our plans could come to nothing. The realization that while that twisted, hateful creature in the asylum went on drawing the breath of life, Gratia would never be free. We were like lonely children, playing desperately at some pitiful game, trying to ignore the horror-infested night that closed slowly in on every side.

It is difficult to trace the stages by which the change overtook me. I think it began with an unwonted restlessness that laid siege to my mind scant days after Claude had been committed to the asylum. I took to wandering, alone, along the most desolate, brine-eaten stretches of the coast; a seething uneasiness pounded mercilessly in my brain. There were horrible moments of blank detachment—moments when a wild exhilaration crawled along my spine, and I would prowl the nigh-dark labyrinths of the Priory, full of a sense of illimitable power. More than once I came to myself, damp with sweat, chilled, standing before that carven door in the East Wing; the door leading to the hellish tomb that housed everything that stood for the blasphemous evil of Claude Ashur.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the moment would pass, and, shaken, bewildered, I would fall across my bed, sinking into a deep, restless sleep. I never mentioned those horrible nocturnal seizures to Gratia, and yet, there were times when her eyes met mine, and I saw the half-fearful question that lurked behind her gentle gaze. She sensed that something was wrong. Her unspoken suspicions became a hideous reality the night I played the piano.

As I crossed the room and sat down on the oval bench, I told myself music might have a soothing effect on my nerves. It was only a rationalization of the sudden, inordinately passionate desire to play that had overwhelmed me. The yellowing keys were cold and slimy to the touch; my fingers moved over them with a grace, a sense of ease I had never known before. The saccharine melancholy of a Chopin Nocturne billowed into the twilit room; thrumming bass notes pulsed darkly against my hypersensitive eardrums; then, abruptly, the music was no longer Chopin's. The pounding, demented chords that trembled under my feverish touch grew cruel and malignant. Through the drumming of the bass, treble notes blended wildly into the unholy wailing of myriad lost souls. Godless rhythm crashed against shadows that writhed obscenely, keeping time. Only once before had I heard such hellish music drawn from the whining bowels of a piano. The song that

shrilled beneath my fingers, now, was the chant of the damned that Gratia had played for Claude Ashur.

I knew she was behind me. My nostrils quivered tautly; the scent of her hair and skin seemed to permeate the very air of the room. My fingers stiffened and were still; the final broken wail of the music lashed out, hung like some poisonous vapor in the stillness, and died. I turned slowly on the bench, and then rose. Her sports-dress was a vivid yellow blur in the dusk-shadowed doorway; her face, the soft fullness of her lips, the ripe body that was at once chaste and subtly sensual, wavered before my burning eyes. I was before her, now, and my hand touched the warm firmness of her arm. The smile that had trembled on her lips a moment before, shadowed away. Her eyes were suddenly bright with fear. I think I smiled; I felt my lips curl, slowly, stiffly. My tongue moved, and from some vast nothingness, a voice that wasn't mine spoke through my mouth.

"Gratia, my dear … my bride … my beloved!"

Sheer, hysterical terror twisted her face as I bent to kiss her; she tore free of my hand and cringed against the wall; the words tumbled, shrill and frantically pleading, from her colorless lips.

"No! Let me alone! No. Please! You have got to let me alone!"

Somewhere in an obscure corner of my brain there was a sharp snapping sound. The stinging blur of my eyes seemed to clear abruptly, and, for the first time, I actually saw the utter loathing and fear that warped Gratia's face. I felt weak; sweat trickled along my jaw and down my neck. Fear-fraught bewilderment did tricks with my stomach. I stared helplessly at the frail creature who cowered before me, her hands covering her face. My throat was terribly dry; it made words difficult.

"What is it? … Gratia, what have I done? … What …"

I stopped short; she had taken her hands from before her eyes. For a long moment she only stared, puzzled, terrified; then she was in my arms, crying gently. There was a strange note of relief in the sobs that quivered through her warm body. My dull puzzlement deepened.

"What is it?" I repeated softly. "What frightened you so …"

"Nothing …" She shook her head and a tinkle of brittle, half-hysterical laughter sounded in her throat. "Forgive me, darling … I had the oddest feeling just then … It must have been the music … his music … And … and, your face … It was so pale; the way you smiled at me … that crooked, rotten smile … I …" The laughter bubbled again and broke on a sob. "It's fantastic, I know … But for a minute … I thought you were Claude!"

VIII

I had not slept. The fire on my bedroom hearth had long since died to a few blood-red embers, and, well after midnight, the storm that had threatened all day had broken viciously over Inneswich.

I sat very still, strangely tense, listening, and the muttering of the sea echoed mockingly the tones of Gratia Thane: "… thought you were Claude, I thought you were Claude, Claude, Claude!" Chilled, trembling, I sprang to my feet and paced the floor aimlessly; lightning slit the blackness beyond my casement. I started and swore. My hand shook when I opened a fresh bottle of rye, and poured a stiff one. I sank into the chair again, trying to shut out the maddening chant of the surf. Time and again, in the last night-shadowed hours, I had done all these things. But, I had not slept. I was not dreaming when I heard the drums.

And, then, in some forgotten crevice of my consciousness, the unconquerable danger-signal flashed redly. No! the brain screamed, soundlessly. Don't. You can't give in! You can't let Claude win! Return! You must return … to yourself … to your own body! You must! I felt my numb lips twisting in an agonized last effort at speech.

"No!" my own voice roared hoarsely above the drums. "No! Go back! I must go back … must …"

With a tremendous effort I forced myself to stand. My legs were like jelly under me. I don't remember how I managed to stumble through the foul-smelling gloom! I remember only the door—the yawning, black rectangle of that final hope of escape—and that the hissing tongue of the flame seemed to leap higher in the brazier, stretching forth cruel, blazing fingers to hold me back. I had almost reached the threshold when it happened.

The dull, throbbing sound stabbed like a needle through my brain. The drums! I staggered and slammed into the doorjamb; leaden paralysis tangled my legs; I lurched crazily and slid to the floor. I tried to scream. It was no good. Voiceless, I careened downward through a bottomless pit of hate. And, out of the black, viscid whirlpool that swallowed me, Claude Ashur's voice wailed softly.

"Mine, Richard! I tell you, this flesh is mine! I have returned! I've come back to claim my freedom—freedom in the body that once was yours! You hear? I shall be free, and you shall be the entombed one! You, my dear brother! You!"

Babbling laughter echoed spitefully through the smothering night that welled up before my eyes; with a last frantic effort, I tried to gain my feet, then, gasping for breath, pitched forward, and lay there, utterly powerless …

Through all of it, as though from some tremendous distance, some other moment of time, Claude Ashur's muted cynical voice hissed in my ears.

"You see, Richard … It wasn't hard. It wasn't hard at all. This body is mine, now. You hear? Mine! Directed by my brain, thinking my thoughts, speaking my words, doing the bidding of my will …"

The blasphemous words dribbled off into whining laughter that echoed mockingly, and died along the sterile stillness of endless corridors …

The first conscious sensation was one of gnawing pain that seemed to pervade every inch of my body, eating at my flesh like some needle-fanged cannibalistic monster. With an exhausting effort, I opened my eyes. The lids felt oddly swollen, and I saw only mistily through narrow slits. The whiteness wavered before me again; I made out a whitewashed ceiling and tall, colorless walls; pallid moonlight slanted through a window on my right. I blinked and tried to bring the ghostly rectangle of the casement into better focus. Then, the razor-edged knife of terror sliced into my brain. The moonlight that seeped into that barren chamber was cut into segments by shadowy stripes; the window was reinforced—with steel bars!

A dry scream tore through my stiff, swollen lips. No! These weren't my legs; these horrible bony stilts that stretched before me, the pale skin of them bloated and desiccated, covered with suppurating brown sores! Frantically, I tore at the nightshirt that cloaked me, and then, turned violently sick. The white flesh was raw and running, as though myriad maggots had fed upon it; a foul, noisome stench stung my nostrils. Madly whimpering, I rose and staggered to the barred casement. I think I prayed. I know I was crying. And, then, reflected in a window-glass made opaque by outer darkness, I saw the moon-washed horror of the face.

The thing that stared at me from the viscid depths of the casement-pane was more bestial than human. Its tremendous white forehead was swollen beyond all proportion; the thickened nose, scarred by two gaping holes of nostrils, was like nothing but the snout of a leonine animal, and below it, quivered a slavering, decayed gash that was the mouth. Sunken in the blue-black sockets, twin pin-dots of demented flame flashed evilly. There were no eyebrows, and the sweat-damp, straggling patches of hair that studded a sore-covered scalp gave it the aspect of some monstrous Medusa risen from the bowels of the sea. And, even as I watched, strangled with loathing, those

corrupt lips curled slowly in a malevolent grin, and I knew that the thing before me, wreathed in that vicious smile of insane triumph, was the face of Claude Ashur!

I think I screamed. Realization flooded in upon me like a rising, slimy tide. In that moment I saw and understood the unholy motive that had lain behind the rites I had witnessed in the East Wing of Inneswich Priory. I knew, now, why my brother had wanted the body of Gratia Thane; I knew that the added power he might have gained through her beauty was only incidental. Claude Ashur had needed a new body. For the flesh in which his spirit had been housed since birth was riddled with disease, tottering on the brink of the grave.

The normal, healthy body of his wife had been his only hope of survival. He had wanted it in exchange for the putrescent thing I saw, now, in the mirror of the window. And, when I had destroyed his hope of claiming Gratia's body, he had claimed mine, instead!

Reeling blindly to the steel-plated door, I pounded frantically at its heavy panels until the sickening pulp of those rotten hands bled. I felt these stiff lips working. I heard a voice that wasn't mine screaming from this diseased, alien throat. Words crashed wildly against the nighted stillness of the asylum.

"My brother! Claude! Find Claude! My body … I tell you, he's stolen my body! He's won! He's free! You've got to find him … He'll destroy Gratia … He'll claim her as he did me … Please! You've got to let me out! I've got to stop him! Please!"

They came. They came in their white tunics and shook their heads and talked in pitying undertones. They smiled kind, wise smiles that said: The poor devil is completely mad; humor him. They strapped me to the bed and went off a bit to whisper among themselves. After a while, the gray-haired one came over to me; he had the hypodermic in his right hand. I winced as the needle plunged into the crook of my arm. The gray-haired one spoke in a lulling voice.

"You must take things more calmly, Claude. Everything is all right, but you're ill, and you must let us make you well …" He smiled automatically. "You've been a very naughty boy for nearly a month now. That's why we must use the needle. I've told you many times; you must try to remember, Claude. Your brother, Richard, left the country nearly a week ago …"

I shook my head dully; my tongue worked in the foul-tasting hole that was my mouth.

“Gratia?” I gasped. “Where’s Gratia?”

The gray-haired one looked away; the blurred white figures of the other doctors shifted on uneasy feet and mumbled sympathetically. The hypo was beginning to take effect; the voices were only a thick murmur in my brain now. The gray-haired doctor was trying to explain something to me in the same calm tones. The words didn’t reach me. But I knew what he was saying. Soft, triumphant laughter gurgled bitterly in the white void, and I knew that, wherever my brother had gone, Gratia had gone with him. I knew that Claude Ashur had won.

There is no longer any fear in me. Fear died with the hope of saving Gratia. I know now that I could never have won out against the infernal evil of Claude Ashur. He was, and is, too strong. Too strong for all of us. I know that at this moment, somewhere, his foul mind lives on. Perhaps he has destroyed Gratia as he destroyed me. Often I wonder how many others have met the same monstrous fate. God only knows. But we, at least, are at rest; the destroyed have come to an end of horror. There is nothing left for us to do but give warning.

People will read this and scoff; they will call it the wild scrawling of a madman on the crumbling lip of the grave. They will laugh. But it will be a nervous, sickly laughter that doesn’t ring true. For in the end, when they have correlated the things I have told with the accepted facts, they will know that I am right. Claude Ashur will go on. For, strangely enough, insane as he is, I think perhaps he has captured the vagrant dream of every man—the only true immortality; the immortality of the mind that will not be imprisoned in one fleshly tomb, but will find others, and, somehow, forever escape the ravages of disease, the oblivion of the grave.

It is ironic and cruel that such a man should have made the discovery. But it is more than just that. It is dangerous. Not to me; not to Gratia and the others who have fought with Claude and lost. Nothing can touch us now. But Claude Ashur can touch you. Perhaps, even now, he is near you; perhaps he speaks with the lips of a lover, or watches through the eyes of an old and trusted friend, smiling that ancient, enigmatic smile. Laugh, if you will, but remember:

The will of Claude Ashur is possessed of a strength that goes beyond flesh and blood. One by one, it has met and vanquished every obstacle in his path. Before it, even Death has bowed a humbled head. And what it could not conquer, it has destroyed. If you doubt such power, you have only to think of me. It was that unholy strength of will that usurped my clean, healthy body,

and left me entombed in this swollen, putrescent mass of flesh that has been rotting these twenty years with leprosy.

MVVM

THE PATTERN

Ramsey Campbell

Di seemed glad when he went outside. She was sitting on the settee, legs shoved beneath her, eyes squeezed tight, looking for the end of her novel. She acknowledged the sound of the door with a short nod, pinching her mouth as if he'd been distracting her. He controlled his resentment; he'd often felt the same way about her while painting.

He stood outside the cottage, gazing at the spread of green. Scattered buttercups crystallised the yellow tinge of the grass. At the centre of the field a darker green rushed up a thick tree, branching, multiplying; toward the edges of the field, bushes were foaming explosions, blue-green, red-edged green. Distant trees displayed an almost transparent papery spray of green. Beyond them lay curves of hills, toothed with tiny pines and a couple of random towers, all silver as mist. As Tony gazed, sunlight spilled from behind clouds to the sound of a huge soft wind in the trees. The light filled the greens, intensifying them; they blazed.

Yes, he'd be able to paint here. For a while he had feared he wouldn't. He'd imagined Di struggling to find her final chapter, himself straining to paint, the two of them chafing against each other in the little cottage. But good Lord, this was only their second day here. They weren't giving themselves time. He began to pace, looking for the vantage point of his painting.

There were patterns and harmonies everywhere. You only had to find them, find the angle from which they were clear to you. He had seen that one day, while painting the microcosm of patterns in a patch of verdure. Now he painted nothing but glimpses of harmony, those moments when distant echoes of colour or movement made sense of a whole landscape; he painted only the harmonies, abstracted. Often he felt they were glimpses of a total pattern that included him, Di, his painting, her writing life, the world: his being there and seeing was part of the pattern. Though it was impossible to perceive the total pattern, the sense was there. Perhaps that sense was the purpose of all real art.

Suddenly he halted. A May wind was passing through the landscape. It unfurled through the tree in the field; in a few moments the trees beyond the

field responded. It rippled through the grass, and the lazy grounded swaying echoed the leisurely unfolding of the clouds. All at once he saw how the clouds elaborated the shapes of the trees and bushes, subtracting colour, lazily changing their shapes as they drifted across the sky.

He had it now. The wind passed, but it didn't matter. He could paint what he'd seen; he would see it again when the breeze returned. He was already mixing colours in his mind, feeling enjoyment begin: nobody could ever mass-produce the colours he saw. He turned toward the cottage, to tiptoe upstairs for his canvas and the rest without disturbing Di.

Behind him someone screamed.

In the distance, across the field. One scream: the hills echoed curtly. Tony had to grab an upright of the cottage porch to steady himself. Everything snapped sharp, the cottage garden, the uneven stone wall, the overgrown path beyond the wall, the fence and the wide empty flower-sprinkled field. There was nobody in sight. The echoes of the cry had stopped at once, except in Tony's head. The violence of the cry reverberated there. Of what emotion? Terror, outrage, disbelief, agony? All of them?

The door slammed open behind him. Di emerged, blinking red-eyed, like an angrily roused sleeper. "What's wrong?" she demanded nervously. "Was that you?"

"I don't know what it was. Over there somewhere."

He was determined to be calm. The cry had unnerved him; he didn't want her nervousness to reach him too—he ignored it. "It might have been someone with their foot in a trap," he said. "I'll see if I can see."

He backed the car off the end of the path, onto the road. Di watched him over the stone wall, rather anxiously. He didn't really expect to find the source of the cry; probably its cause was past now. He was driving away from Di's edginess, to give her a chance to calm down. He couldn't paint while he was aware of her nervousness.

He drove. Beside the road the field stretched placidly, easing the scream from his mind. Perhaps someone had just stumbled, had cried out with the shock. The landscape looked too peaceful for anything worse. But for a while he tried to remember the sound, some odd quality about it that nagged at him. It hadn't sounded quite like a cry; it had sounded as if—it was gone.

He drove past the far side of the field beyond the cottage. A path ran through the trees along the border; Ploughman's Path, a sign said. He parked and ventured up the path a few hundred yards. Patches of light flowed over the undergrowth, blurring and floating together, parting and dimming. The

trees were full of the intricate trills and chirrups of birds. Tony called out a few times: “Anyone there? Anybody hurt?” But the leaves hushed him.

He drove farther uphill, toward the main road. He would return widely around the cottage, so that Di could be alone for a while. Sunlight and shadow glided softly over the Cotswold hills. Trees spread above the road, their trunks lagged with ivy. Distant foliage was a bank of green folds, elaborate as coral.

On the main road he found a pub, the Farmer’s Rest. That would be good in the evenings. The London agent hadn’t mentioned that; he’d said only that the cottage was isolated, peaceful. He’d shown them photographs, and though Tony had thought the man had never been near the cottage, Di had loved it at once. Perhaps it was what her book needed.

He glimpsed the cottage through a gap in the hills. Its mellow Cotswold stone seemed concentrated, a small warm amber block beyond the tiny tree-pinned field, a mile below. The green of the field looked simple now, among the fields where sheep and cattle strolled sporadically. He was sorry he’d come so far from it. He drove toward the turnoff that would take him back to the cottage and eventually back to its road.

Di ran to the garden wall as he drove onto the path. “Where were you?” she said. “I was worried.”

Oh, Christ, he thought, defeated. “Just looking. I didn’t find anything. Well, I found a pub on the main road.”

She tutted at him, smiling wryly: just like him, she meant. “Are you going to paint?”

She couldn’t have made any progress on her book; she would find it even more difficult now. “I don’t think so,” he said.

“Can’t you work either? Oh, let’s forget it for today. Let’s walk to the pub and get absolutely pissed.”

At least the return journey would be downhill, he thought, walking. A soft wind tugged at them whenever they passed gaps; green light and shadow swarmed among branches. The local beer was good, he found. Even Di liked it, though she wasn’t fond of beer. Among the Toby jugs and bracketed rifles, farmers discussed dwindling profits, the delivery of calves, the trapping of foxes, the swollen inflamed eyes of myxomatosis. Tony considered asking one of them about the scream, but now they were all intent on the dartboard; they were a team, practising sombrely for a match. “I know there’s an ending that’s right for the book,” Di said. “It’s just finding it.”

When they returned to the cottage, amber clouds floated above the sunset. The horizon was the colour of the stone. The field lay quiet and chill. Di gazed at the cottage, her hands light on the wall. After a while he thought of asking why, but her feelings might be too delicate, too elusive. She would tell him if she could.

They made love beneath the low dark beams. Afterward he lay in her on their quilt, gazing out at the dimming field. The tree was heavy with gathering darkness; a sheep bleated sleepily. Tony felt peaceful, in harmony. But Di was moving beneath him. “Don’t squash,” she said. As she lay beside him he felt her going into herself, looking for her story. At the moment she didn’t dare risk the lure of peace.

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When he awoke, the room was gloomy. Di lay face upturned, mouth slackly opened. Outside the ground hissed with rain beneath a low grey sky; the walls of the room streamed with the shadows of water.

He felt dismally oppressed. He had hoped to paint today. Now he imagined himself and Di hemmed in by the rain, struggling with their balks beneath the low beams, wandering irritably about the small rooms, among the fat mock-leather furniture and stray electric fires. He knew Di hoped this book would make her more than just another children’s novelist, but it couldn’t while he was in the way.

Suddenly he glimpsed the landscape. All the field glowed sultry green. He saw how the dark sky and even the dark framing room were necessary to call forth the sullen glow. Perhaps he could paint that glimpse. After a while he kissed Di awake. She’d wanted to be awakened early.

After breakfast she reread *The Song of the Trees*. She turned over the last page of the penultimate chapter and stared at the blank table beneath. At last she pushed herself away from the table and began to pace shortly. Tony tried to keep out of her way. When his own work was frustrated she seemed merely an irritation; he was sure she must feel the same of him. “I’m going out for a walk,” she called, opening the front door. He didn’t offer to walk with her. He knew she was searching for her conclusion.

When the rain ceased he carried his painting materials outside. For a moment he wished he had music. But they couldn’t have transported the stereo system, and their radio was decrepit. As he left the cottage he glanced back at Di’s flowers, massed minutely in vases.

The grey sky hung down, trapping light in ragged flourishes of white cloud. Distant trees were smudges of mist; the greens of the field merged

into a dark glow. On the near side of the fence the path unfurled innumerable leaves, oppressive in their dark intricacy, heavy with raindrops. Even the raindrops were relentlessly green. Metallic chimes and chirrs of birds surrounded him, as did the thick rich smell of earth.

Only the wall of the garden held back the green. The heavy jagged stones were a response to the landscape. He could paint that, the rough texture of stone, the amber stone spattered with darker ruggedness, opposing the overpoweringly lush green. But it wasn't what he'd hoped to paint, and it didn't seem likely to make him much money.

Di liked his paintings. At his first exhibition she'd sought him out to tell him so; that was how they'd met. Her first book was just beginning to earn royalties; she had been working on her second. Before they were married he'd begun to illustrate her work.

If exhibiting wasn't too lucrative, illustrating books was less so. He knew Di felt uneasy as the breadwinner; sometimes he felt frustrated that he couldn't earn them more—the inevitable castration anxiety. That was another reason why she wanted *The Song of the Trees* to sell well: to promote his work. She wanted his illustrations to be as important as the writing.

He liked what there was of the book. He felt his painting could complete the prose; they'd discussed ways of setting out the pages. The story was about the last dryads of a forest, trapped among the remaining trees by a fire that had sprung from someone's cigarette. As they watched picnickers sitting on blackened stumps amid the ash, breaking branches from the surviving trees, leaving litter and matches among them, the dryads realised they must escape before the next fire. Though it was unheard of, they managed to relinquish the cool green peace of the trees and pass through the clinging dead ash to the greenery beyond. The coursed through the greenery, seeking welcoming trees. But the book was full of their tribulations: a huge grim oak-dryad who drove them away from the saplings he protected; willow-dryads who let them go deep into their forest, but only because they would distract the dark thick-voiced spirit of the swamp; glittering birch-dryads, too cold and aloof to bear; morose hawthorns, whose flowers farted at the dryads, in case they were animals come to chew the leaves.

He could tell Di loved writing the book—perhaps too much so, for she'd thought it would produce its own ending. But she had been balked for weeks. She had wanted to write an ending that satisfied her totally; she was determined not to fake anything. He knew she hoped the book might appeal

to adults too. “Maybe it needs peace,” she said at last, and that brought them to the cottage. Maybe she was right. This was only their third day, she had plenty of time.

As he mused, the sluggish sky parted. Sunlight spilled over an edge of cloud. At once the greens that had merged into green emerged again, separating: a dozen greens, two dozen. Dots of flowers brightened over the field, colours filled the raindrops piercingly. He saw the patterns at once: almost a mandala. The clouds were whiter now, fragmented by blue; the sky was rolling open from the horizon. He began to mix colours. Surely the dryads must have passed through such a landscape.

The patterns were emerging on his canvas when, beyond the field, someone screamed.

It wasn’t Di. He was sure it wasn’t a woman’s voice. It was the voice he’d heard yesterday, but more outraged still; it sounded as if it were trying to utter something too dreadful for language. The hills swallowed its echoes at once, long before his heart stopped pounding loudly.

As he tried to breathe in calm, he realised what was odd about the scream. It had sounded almost as much like an echo as its reiteration in the hills: louder, but somehow lacking a source. It reminded him—yes, of the echo that sometimes precedes a loud sound-source on a record.

Just an acoustic effect. But that hardly explained the scream itself. Someone playing a joke? Someone trying to frighten the intruders at the cottage? The local simpleton? An animal in a trap, perhaps, for his memory of the scream contained little that sounded human. Someone was watching him.

He turned sharply. Beyond the nearby path, at the far side of the road, stood a clump of trees. The watcher was hiding among them; Tony could sense him there—he’d almost glimpsed him skulking hurriedly behind the trunks. He felt instinctively that the stalker was a man.

Was it the man who’d screamed? No, he hadn’t had time to make his way round the edge of the field. Perhaps he had been drawn by the scream. Or perhaps he’d come to spy on the strangers. Tony stared at the trees, waiting for the man to betray his presence, but he couldn’t stare long; the trunks were vibrating restlessly, incessantly—heat-haze, of course, though it looked somehow odder. Oh, let the man spy if he wanted to. Maybe he’d venture closer to look at Tony’s work, as people did. But when Tony rested from his next burst of painting, he could tell the man had gone.

Soon he saw Di hurrying anxiously down the road. Of course, she must have heard the scream. “I’m all right, love,” he called.

“It was the same, wasn’t it? Did you see what it was?”

“No. Maybe it’s children. Playing a joke.”

She wasn’t reassured so easily. “It sounded like a man,” she said. She gazed at his painting. “That is good,” she said, and wondered into the cottage without mentioning her book. He knew she wasn’t going to write.

The scream had worried her more than she’d let him see. Her anxiety lingered even now she knew he was unharmed. Something else to hinder her book, he thought irritably. He couldn’t paint now, but at least he knew what remained to be painted.

He sat at the kitchen table while she cooked a shepherd’s pie in the range. Inertia hung oppressively above them. “Do you want to go to the pub later?” he said.

“Maybe. I’ll see.”

He gazed ahead at the field in the window, the cooling tree; branches swayed a little behind the glass. In the kitchen something trembled—heat over the electric stove. Di was reaching for the teapot with one hand, lifting the kettle with the other; the steaming spout tilted above her bare leg. Tony stood up, mouth opening—but she’d put the kettle down. “It’s all right,” he answered her frown, as he scooped up spilled sugar from the table.

She stood at the range. “Maybe the pub might help us to relax,” he said.

“I don’t want to relax! That’s no use!” She turned too quickly, and overbalanced toward the range. Her bare arm was going to rest on the metal that quivered with heat. She pushed herself back from the wall, barely in time. “You see what I mean?” she demanded.

“What’s the matter? Clumsiness isn’t like you.”

“Stop watching me, then. You make me nervous.”

“Hey, you can’t just blame me.” How would she have felt if she had been spied on earlier? There was more wrong with her than her book and her irrationally lingering worry about him, he was sure. Sometimes she had what seemed to be psychic glimpses. “Is it the cottage that’s wrong?” he said.

“No, I like the cottage.”

“The area, then? The field?”

She came to the table to saw bread with a carving knife; the cottage lacked a bread knife. “I like it here. It’s probably just me,” she said, musing about something.

The kettle sizzled, parched. “Bloody clean simplicity,” she said. She disliked electric stoves. She moved the kettle to a cold ring and turned back. The point of the carving knife thrust over the edge of the table. Her turn would impale her thigh on the blade.

Tony snatched the knife back. The blade and the wood of the table seemed to vibrate for a moment. He must have jarred the table. Di was staring rather abstractedly at the knife. “That’s three,” he said. “You’ll be all right now.”

During dinner she was abstracted. Once she said “I really like this cottage, you know. I really do.” He didn’t try to reach her. After dinner he said “Look, I’m sorry if I’ve been distracting you,” but she shook her head, hardly listening. They didn’t seem to be perceiving each other very well.

He was washing up when she said “My God.” He glanced anxiously at her. She was staring up at the beams. “Of course. Of course,” she said, reaching for her notebook. She pushed it away at once and hurried upstairs. Almost immediately he heard her begin typing.

He tried to paint, until darkness began to mix with his colours. He stood gazing as twilight collected in the field. The typewriter chattered. He felt rather unnecessary, out of place. He must buy some books in Camside tomorrow. He felt restless, a little resentful. “I’m going down to the pub for a while,” he called. The typewriter’s bell rang, rang again.

The pub was surrounded by jeeps, sports cars, floridly painted vans. Crowds of young people pressed close to the tables, on stools, on the floor; they shouted over each other, laughed, rolled cigarettes. One was passing around a sketchbook, but Tony didn’t feel confident enough to introduce himself. A few of the older people doggedly practised darts, the rest surrounded Tony at the bar. He chatted about the weather and the countryside, listened to the prices of grain. He hoped he’d have a chance to ask about the scream.

He was slowing in the middle of his second pint when the barman said “One of the new ones, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right.” On an impulse he said loudly enough for the people around him to hear “We’re in the cottage across the field from Ploughman’s Path.”

The man didn’t move hurriedly to serve someone else. Nobody gasped, nobody backed away from Tony. Well, that was encouraging. “Are you liking it?” the barman said.

“Very much. There’s just one odd thing.” Now this was his chance. “We keep hearing someone screaming across the field.”

Even then the room didn't fall silent. But it was as if he'd broken a taboo; people withdrew slightly from him, some of them seemed resentful. Three women suddenly excused themselves from different groups at the bar, as if he were threatening to become offensive. "It'll be an animal caught in a trap," the barman said.

"I suppose so." He could see the man didn't believe it either.

The barman was staring at him. "Weren't you with a girl yesterday?"

"She's back at the cottage."

Everyone nearby looked at Tony. When he glanced at them, they looked away. "You want to be sure she's safe," the barman muttered, and hurried to fill flourished glasses. Tony gulped down his beer, cursing his imagination, and almost ran to the car.

Above the skimming patch of lit tarmac, moths ignited; a rabbit froze, then leapt. Discovered trees rushed out of the dark, to be snatched back at once by the night. The light bleached the leaves, the rushing tunnels of boles seemed subterraneously pale. The wide night was still. He could hear nothing but the hum of the car. Above the hills hung enormous dim clouds, grey as rocks.

He could see Di as he hurried up the path. Her head was silhouetted on the curtain; it leaned at an angle against the back of the settee. He fumbled high in the porch for the hidden key. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was loosely open. Her typescript lay at her feet.

She was blinking, smiling at him. He could see both needed effort; her eyes were red, she looked depressed—she always did when she'd finished a book. "See what you think of it," she said, handing him the pages. Beneath her attempt at a professional's impersonality he thought she was offering the chapter to him shyly as a young girl.

Emerging defeated from a patch of woodland, the dyads saw a cottage across a field. It stood in the still light, peaceful as the evening. They could feel the peace filling its timbers: not a green peace but a warmth, stillness, stability. As they drew nearer they saw an old couple within. The couple had worked hard for their peace; now they'd achieved it here. Tony knew they were himself and Di. One by one the dryads passed gratefully into the dark wood of the beams, the doors.

He felt oddly embarrassed. When he managed to look at her he could only say "Yes, it's good. You've done it."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad." She was smiling peacefully now.

As they climbed the stairs she said “If we have children they’ll be able to help me too. They can criticise.”

She hoped the book would let them afford children. “Yes, they will,” he said.

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The scream woke him. For a moment he thought he’d dreamt it, or had cried out in his sleep. But the last echo was caught in the hills. Faint as it was, he could feel its intolerable horror, its despair.

He lay blinking at the sunlight. The white-painted walls shone. Di hadn’t awakened; he was glad. The scream throbbed in his brain. Today he must find out what it was.

After breakfast he told Di he was going into Camside. She was still depressed after completing the book; she looked drained. She didn’t offer to accompany him. She stood at the garden wall, watching him blindly, dazzled by the sun. “Be careful driving,” she called.

The clump of trees opposite the end of the path was quivering. Was somebody hiding behind the trunks? Tony frowned at her. “Do you feel—” but he didn’t want to alarm her unnecessarily “—anything? Anything odd?”

“What sort of thing?” But he was wondering whether to tell her when she said “I like this place. Don’t spoil it.”

He went back to her. “What will you do while I’m out?”

“Just stay in the cottage. I want to read through the book. Why are you whispering?” He smiled at her, shaking his head. The sense of someone watching had faded, though the tree trunks still quivered.

Plushy white and silver layers of cloud sailed across the blue sky. He drove the fifteen miles to Camside, a slow roller-coaster ride between green quilts spread easily over the hills. Turned earth displayed each shoot on the nearer field; trees met over the roads and parted again.

Camside was wholly the colours of rusty sand; similar stone framed the wide glass of the library. Mullioned windows multiplied reflections. Gardens and walls were thick with flowers. A small river coursed beneath a bridge; in the water, sunlight darted incessantly among pebbles. He parked outside a pub, The Wheatsheaf, and walked back. Next to the library stood an odd squat building of the amber stone, a square block full of small windows whose open casements were like griddles filled with panes; over its door a new plastic sign said *Camside Observer*. The newspaper’s files might be useful. He went in.

A girl sat below a low white Swedish desk; the crimson bell of her desk lamp clanged silently against the white walls, the amber windowsills. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I’m, I’m doing some research into an area near here, Ploughman’s Path. Have you heard of it?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She was glancing away, looking for help to a middle-aged man who had halted in a doorway behind her desk. “Mr Poole?” she called.

“We’ve run a few stories about that place,” the man told Tony. “You’ll find them in our files, on microfilm. Next door, in the library.”

“Oh good. Thanks.” But that might mean hours of searching. “Is there anyone here who knows the background?”

The man frowned, and saw Tony realise that meant yes. “The man who handled the last story is still on our staff,” he said. “But he isn’t here now.”

“Will he be here later?”

“Yes, probably. No, I’ve no idea when.” As Tony left he felt the man was simply trying to prevent his colleague from being pestered.

The library was a long room, spread with sunlight. Sunlight lay dazzling on the glossy tables, cleaved shade among the bookcases; a trolley overflowed with thrillers and romances. Ploughman’s Path? Oh, yes—and the librarian showed him a card file that indexed local personalities, events, areas. She snapped up a card for him as if it were a tarot’s answer. Ploughman’s Path: see Victor Hill, *Legendry and Customs of the Severn Valley*. “And there’s something on microfilm,” she said, but he was anxious to make sure the book was on the shelf.

It was. It was bound in op-art blues. He carried it to a table; its blues vibrated in the sunlight. The index told him the passage about Ploughman’s Path covered six pages. He riffled hastily past photographs of standing stones, a trough in the binding full of breadcrumbs, a crushed jagged-legged fly. Ploughman’s Path—

> Why the area bounding Ploughman’s Path should be dogged by ill luck and tragedy is not known. Folk living in the cottage nearby have sometimes reported hearing screams produced by no visible agency. Despite the similarity of this to banshee legends, no such legend appears to have grown up locally. But Ploughman’s Path, and the area bounding it farthest from the cottage (see map), has been so often visited by tragedy and misfortune that local folk

> dislike to even mention the name, which they fear will bring bad luck.

Farthest from the cottage. Tony relaxed. So long as the book said so, that was all right. And the last line told him why they'd behaved uneasily at the Farmer's Rest. He read on, his curiosity unmixed now with apprehension.

But good Lord, the area was unlucky. Rumours of Roman sacrifices were only its earliest horrors. As the history of the place became more accurately documented, the tragedies grew worse. A gallows set up within sight of the cottage, so that the couple living there must watch their seven-year-old daughter hanged for theft; it had taken her hours to die. An old woman accused of witchcraft by gossip, set on fire and left to burn alive on the path. A mute child who'd fallen down an old well: coping stones had fallen on him, breaking his limbs and hiding him from searchers—years later his skeleton had been found. A baby caught in an animal trap. God, Tony thought. No wonder he'd heard screams.

A student was using the microfilm reader. Tony went back to the *Observer* building. A pear-shaped red-faced man leaned against the wall, chatting to the receptionist; he wore a tweedy pork-pie hat, a blue shirt and waistcoat, tweed trousers. "Watch out, here's trouble," he said as Tony entered.

"Has he come in yet?" Tony asked the girl. "The man who knows about Ploughman's Path?"

"What's your interest?" the red-faced man demanded.

"I'm staying in the cottage near there. I've been hearing odd things. Cries."

"Have you now." The man pondered, frowning. "We'll you're looking at the man who knows," he decided to say, thumping his chest. "Roy Burley. Burly Roy, that's me. Don't you know me? Don't you read our paper? Time you did, then." He snatched an Observer from a rack and stuffed it into Tony's hand.

"You want to know about the path, eh? It's all up here." He tapped his hat. "I'll tell you what, though, it's a hot day for talking. Do you fancy a drink? Tell old Puddle I'll be back soon," he told the girl.

He thumped on the door of The Wheatsheaf. "They'll open up. They know me here." At last a man reluctantly opened the door, glancing discouragingly at Tony. "It's all right, Bill, don't look so bloody glum," Roy Burley said. "He's a friend of mine."

A girl sat out beer mats; her radio sang that everything was beautiful, in its own way. Roy Burley bought two pints and vainly tried to persuade Bill to join them. “Get that down you,” he told Tony. “The only way to start work. You’d think they could do without me over the road, the way some of the buggers act. But they soon start screaming if they think my copy’s going to be late. They’d like to see me out, some of them. Unfortunately for them, I’ve got friends. There I am,” he said, poking a thick finger into the newspaper: *The Countryside This Week*, by Countryman. “And there, and there.” *Social Notes*, by A. Guest. *Entertainments*, by D. Plainman. “What’s your line of business?” he demanded.

“I’m an artist, a painter.”

“Ah, the painters always come down here. And the advertising people. I’ll tell you, the other week we had a photographer—”

By the time it was his round Tony began to suspect he was just an excuse for beers. “You were going to tell me about the screams,” he said when he returned to the table.

The man’s eyes narrowed warily. “You’ve heard them. What do you think they are?”

“I was reading about the place earlier,” Tony said, anxious to win his confidence. “I’m sure all those tragedies must have left an imprint somehow. A kind of recording. If there are ghosts, I think that’s what they are.”

“That’s right.” Roy Burley’s eyes relaxed. “I’ve always thought that. There’s a bit of science in that, it makes sense. Not like some of the things these spiritualists try to sell.”

Tony opened his mouth to head him off from the next anecdote: too late. “We had one of them down here, trying to tell us about Ploughman’s Path. A spiritualist or a medium, same thing. Came expecting us all to be yokels, I shouldn’t wonder. The police weren’t having any, so he tried it on us. Murder brings those mediums swarming like flies, so I’ve heard tell.”

“What murder?” Tony said, confused.

“I thought you read about it.” His eyes had narrowed again. “Oh, you read the book. No, it wouldn’t be in there, too recent.” He gulped beer; everything is beautiful, the radio sang. “Why, it was about the worst thing that ever happened at Ploughman’s Path. I’ve seen pictures of what Jack the Ripper did, but this was worse. They talk about people being flayed alive, but—Christ. Put another in here, Bill.”

He half emptied the refilled glass. “They never caught him. I’d have stopped him, I can tell you,” he said in vague impotent fury. “The police

didn't think he was a local man, because there wasn't any repetition. He left no clues, nobody saw him. At least, not what he looked like. There was a family picnicking in the field the day before the murder, they said they kept feeling there was someone watching. He must have been waiting to catch someone alone.

"I'll tell you the one clever suggestion the medium had. These picnickers heard the scream, what you called the recording. He thought maybe the screams were what attracted the maniac there."

Attracted him there. That reminded Tony of something, but the beer was heavy on his mind. "What else did the medium have to say?"

"Oh, all sorts of rubbish. You know, this mystical stuff. Seeing patterns everywhere, saying everything is a pattern."

"Yes."

"Oh yes," Roy Burley said irritably. "He didn't get that one past me, though. If everything's a pattern it has to include all the horror in the world, doesn't it? Things like this murder? That shut him up for a bit. Then he tried to say things like that may be necessary too, to make up the pattern. These people," he said with a gesture of disgust, "you can't talk to them."

Tony bought him another pint, restraining himself to a half. "Did he have any ideas about the screams?"

"God, I can't remember. Do you really want to hear that rubbish? You wouldn't have liked what he said, let me tell you. He didn't believe in your recording idea." He wiped his frothy lips sloppily. "He came here a couple of years after the murder," he reluctantly answered Tony's encouraging gaze. "He'd read about the tragedies. He held a three-day vigil at Ploughman's Path, or something. Wouldn't it be nice to have that much time to waste? He heard the screams, but—this is what I said you wouldn't like—he said he couldn't feel any trace of the tragedies at all."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you know these people are shupposed to be senshitive to sush things." When he'd finished laughing at himself he said "Oh, he had an explanation, he was full of them. He tried to tell the police and me that the real tragedy hadn't happened yet. He wanted us to believe he could see it in the future. Of course he couldn't say what or when. Do you know what he tried to make out? That there was something so awful in the future it was echoing back somehow, a sort of ghost in reverse. All the tragedies were just echoes, you see. He even made out the place was trying to make this final thing happen, so it could get rid of it at last. It had to make the worst thing

possible happen, to purge itself. That was where the traces of the tragedies had gone—the psychic energy, he called it. The place had converted all that energy, to help it make the thing happen. Oh, he was a real comedian."

"But what about the screams?"

"Same kind of echo. Haven't you ever heard an echo on a record before you could hear the sound? He tried to say the screams were like that, coming back from the future. He was entertaining, I'll give him that. He had all sorts of charts, he'd worked out some kind of numerical pattern, the frequency of the tragedies or something. Didn't impress me. They're like statistics, those things, you can make them mean anything." His eyes narrowed, gazing inward. "I ended up laughing at him. He went off very upset. Well, I had to get rid of him, I'd better things to do than listen to him. It wasn't my fault he was killed," he said angrily, "whatever some people may say."

"Why, how was he killed?"

"Oh, he went back to Ploughman's Path. If he was so upset he shouldn't have been driving. There were some children playing near the path. He must have meant to chase them away, but he lost control of the car, crashed at the end of the path. His legs were trapped and he caught fire. Of course he could have fitted that into his pattern," he mused. "I suppose he'd have said that was what the third scream meant."

Tony started. He fought back the shadows of beer, of the pub. "How do you mean, the third scream?"

"That was to do with his charts. He'd heard three screams in his vigil. He'd worked out that three screams meant it was time for a tragedy. He tried to show me, but I wasn't looking. What's the matter? Don't be going yet, it's my round. What's up, how many screams have you heard?"

"I don't know," Tony blurted. "Maybe I dreamt one." As he hurried out he saw Roy Burley picking up his abandoned beer, saying "Aren't you going to finish this?"

It was all right. There was nothing to worry about, he'd just better be getting back to the cottage. The key grouped clumsily for the ignition. The rusty yellow of Camside rolled back, rushed by green. Tony felt as if he were floating in a stationary car, as the road wheeled by beneath him—as if he were sitting in the front stalls before a cinema screen, as the road poured through the screen, as the blank of a curve hurtled at him: look out! Nearly. He slowed. No need to take risks. But his mind was full of the memory of someone watching from the trees, perhaps drawn there by the screams.

Puffy clouds lazed above the hills. As the Farmer's Rest whipped by, Tony glimpsed the cottage and the field, laid out minutely below; the trees at Ploughman's Path were a tight band of green. He skidded into the side road, fighting the wheel; the road seemed absurdly narrow. Scents of blossoms billowed thickly at him. A few birds sang elaborately, otherwise the passing countryside was silent, deserted, weighed down by heat.

The trunks of the trees at the end of Ploughman's Path were twitching nervously, incessantly. He squeezed his eyes shut. Only heat-haze. Slow down. Nearly home now.

He slammed the car door, which sprang open. Never mind. He ran up the path and thrust the gate back, breaking its latch. The door of the cottage was ajar. He halted in the front room. The cottage seemed full of his harsh panting.

Di's typescript was scattered over the carpet. The dark chairs sat fatly; one lay on its side, its fake leather ripped. Beside it a small object glistened red. He picked it up, staining his fingers. Though it was thick with blood he recognised Di's wedding ring.

When he rushed out after searching the cottage he saw the trail at once. As he forced his way through the fence, sobbing dryly, barbed wire clawed at him. He ran across the field, stumbling and falling, toward Ploughman's Path. The discoloured grass of the trail painted his trouser cuffs and hands red. The trees of Ploughman's Path shook violently, with terror or eagerness. The trail touched their trunks, leading him beneath the foliage to what lay on the path.

It was huge. More than anything else it looked like a tattered cut-out silhouette of a woman's body. It gleamed red beneath the trees; its torso was perhaps three feet wide. On the width of the silhouette's head two eyes were arranged neatly.

The scream ripped the silence of the path, an outraged cry of horror beyond words. It startled him into stumbling forward. He felt numb and dull. His mind refused to grasp what he was seeing; it was like nothing he'd ever seen. There was most of the head, in the crotch of a tree. Other things dangled from branches.

His lips seemed glued together. Since reaching the path he had made no sound. He hadn't screamed, but he'd heard himself scream. At last he recognised that all the screams had been his voice.

He began to turn about rapidly, staring dull-eyed, seeking a direction in which he could look without being confronted with horror. There was none.

He stood aimlessly, staring down near his feet, at a reddened gag.

As all the trees quivered like columns of water he heard movement behind him.

Though he had no will to live, it took him a long time to turn. He knew the pattern had reached its completion, and he was afraid. He had to close his eyes before he could turn, for he could still hear the scream he was about to utter.

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THE SECT OF THE IDIOT

Thomas Ligotti

The primal chaos, Lord of All …
the blind idiot god—Azathoth.
– *Necronomicon*

The extraordinary is a province of the solitary soul. Lost the very moment the crowd comes into view, it remains within the great hollows of dreams, an infinitely secluded place that prepares itself for your arrival, and for mine. Extraordinary joy, extraordinary pain—the fearful poles of a world that both menaces and surpasses this one. It is a miraculous hell towards which one unknowingly wanders. And its gate, in my case, was an old town whose allegiance to the unreal inspired my soul with a holy madness long before my body had come to dwell in that incomparable place.

Soon after arriving in the town—whose identity, along with my own, it is best not to bring to light—I was settled in a high room overlooking the ideal of my dreams through diamond panes. How many times had I already lingered in mind before these windows and roamed in reverie the streets I now gazed upon below.

I discovered an infinite stillness on foggy mornings, miracles of silence on indolent afternoons, and the strangely flickering tableau of never-ending nights. A sense of serene enclosure was conveyed by every aspect of the old town. There were balconies, railed porches, and jutting upper stories of shops and houses that created intermittent arcades over sidewalks. Colossal roofs overhung entire streets and transformed them into the corridors of a single structure containing an uncanny multitude of rooms. And these fantastic crowns were echoed below by lesser roofs that drooped above windows like half-closed eyelids and turned each narrow doorway into a magician's cabinet harboring deceptive depths of shadow.

It is difficult to explain, then, how the old town also conveyed an impression of endlessness, of proliferating unseen dimensions, at the same time that it served as the very image of a claustrophobe's nightmare. Even the nights above the great roofs of the town seemed merely the uppermost

level of an earthbound estate, at most an old attic in which the stars were useless heirlooms and the moon a dusty trunk of dreams. And this paradox was precisely the source of the town's enchantment. I imagined the heavens themselves as part of an essentially interior decor. By day: heaps of clouds like dust balls floated across the empty rooms of the sky. By night: a fluorescent map of the cosmos was painted upon a great black ceiling. How I ached to live forever in this province of medieval autumns and mute winters, serving out my sentence of life among all the visible and invisible wonders I had only dreamed about from so far away.

But no existence, however visionary, is without its trials and traps.

After only a few days in the old town, I had been made acutely sensitive by the solitude of the place and by the solitary manner of my life. Late one afternoon I was relaxing in a chair beside those kaleidoscopic windows, when there was a knock at the door. It was only the faintest of knocks, but so unanticipated was this elementary event, and so developed was my sensitivity, that it seemed like some unwonted upheaval of atmospheric forces, a kind of cataclysm of empty space, an earthquake in the invisible. Hesitantly I walked across the room and stood before the door, which was only a simple brown slab without molding around its frame. I opened it.

"Oh," said the little man waiting in the hallway outside. He had neatly groomed silver hair and strikingly clear eyes. "This is embarrassing. I must have been given the wrong address. The handwriting on this note is such chaos." He looked at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. "Ha! Never mind, I'll go back and check."

However, the man did not immediately leave the scene of his embarrassment; instead, he pushed himself upwards on the points of his tiny shoes and stared over my shoulder into my room. His entire body, compact as it was in stature, seemed to be in a state of concentrated excitement. Finally he said, "Beautiful view from your room," and he smiled a very tight little smile.

"Yes, it is," I replied, glancing back into the room and not really knowing what to think. When I turned around the man was gone.

For a few startled moments I did not move. Then I stepped into the hallway and gazed up and down its dim length. It was not very wide, nor did it extend a great distance before turning a windowless corner. All the doors to the other rooms were closed, and not the slightest noise emerged from any of them. At last I heard what sounded like footsteps descending flights of stairs on the floors below, faintly echoing through the silence, speaking the

quiet language of old rooming houses. I felt relieved and returned to my room.

The rest of the day was uneventful, though somewhat colored by a whole spectrum of imaginings. And that night I experienced a very strange dream, the culmination, it seemed, of both my lifetime of dreaming and of my dreamlike sojourn in the old town. Certainly my view of the town was thereafter dramatically transformed. And yet, despite the nature of the dream, this change was not immediately for the worse.

In the dream I occupied a small dark room, a high room whose windows looked out on a maze of streets which unraveled beneath an abyss of stars. But though the stars were spread across a great reaching blackness, the streets below were bathed in a stale gray dimness which suggested neither night nor day nor any natural phase between them. Gazing out the window, I was sure that cryptic proceedings were taking place in sequestered corners of this scene, vague observances that were at odds with accepted reality. I also felt there was special cause for me to fret over certain things that were happening in one of the other high rooms of the town, a particular room whose location was nevertheless outside my cognizance. Something told me that what was taking place there was specifically devised to affect my existence in a profound manner. At the same time I did not feel myself to be of any consequence in this or any other universe. I was nothing more than an unseen speck lost in the convolutions of strange schemes. And it was this very remoteness from the designs of my dream universe, this feeling of fantastic homelessness amid an alien order of being, that was the source of anxieties I had never before experienced. I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness. In the dream nothing supported my existence, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or simply ended. In the most far-reaching import of the phrase, my life was of *no matter*.

But still I could not keep my attention from straying into that other room, sensing what elaborate plots were evolving there and what they might mean for my existence. I thought I could see indistinct figures occupying that spacious chamber, a place furnished with only a few chairs of odd design and commanding a dizzying view of the starry blackness. The great round moon of the dream created sufficient illumination for the night's purposes, painting the walls of the mysterious room a deep aquatic blue; the stars,

unneeded and ornamental, presided as lesser lamps over this gathering and its nocturnal offices.

As I observed this scene—though not "bodily" present, as is the way with dreams—it became my conviction that certain rooms offered a marvelous solitude for such functions or festivities. Their atmosphere, that intangible quality which exists apart from its composing elements of shape and shade, was of a dreamy cast, a state in which time and space had become deranged. A few moments in these rooms might count as centuries or millennia, and their tiniest niche might encompass a universe. Simultaneously, this atmosphere seemed no different from that of the old rooms, the high and lonely rooms, I had known in waking life, even if *this* room appeared to border on the voids of astronomy and its windows opened onto the infinite outside. Then I began speculating that if the room itself was not one of a unique species, perhaps it was the occupants that had introduced its singular element.

Though each of them was completely draped in a massive cloak, the places in which the material of these garments pushed out and folded inwards as it descended to the floor, along with the unnatural contrivance of the chairs whereupon these creatures were situated, betrayed a peculiarity of formation that held me in a state of both paralyzed terror and spellbound curiosity. What were these beings that their robes should adumbrate such unaccountable configurations? With their tall, angular chairs arranged in a circle, they appeared to be leaning in every direction, like unsettled monoliths. It was as if they were assuming postures that were mysteriously symbolic, locking themselves in patterns hostile to mundane analysis. Above all it was their heads, or at least their topmost segments, that were skewed most radically as they inclined toward one another, nodding in ways heretical to terrestrial anatomy. And it was from this part of their structures that there came forth a soft buzzing noise which seemed to serve them as speech.

But the dream offered another detail which possibly related to the mode of communication among these whispering figures who sat in stagnant moonlight. For projecting out of the bulky sleeves dangling at each figure's side were delicate appendages that appeared to be withered, wilted claws bearing numerous talons that tapered off into drooping tentacles. And all of these stringy digits seemed to be working together with lively and unceasing agitation.

At first sight of these gruesome gestures I felt myself about to awaken, to carry back into the world a sense of terrible enlightenment without sure meaning or possibility of expression in any language except the whispered vows of this eerie sect. But I remained longer in this dream, far longer than was natural. I witnessed further the fidgeting of those shriveled claws, a hyperactive gesticulating which seemed to communicate an intolerable knowledge, some ultimate disclosure concerning the order of things. Such movements suggested an array of repulsive analogies: the spinning legs of spiders, the greedy rubbing of a fly's spindly feelers, the darting tongues of snakes. But my cumulative sensation in the dream was only partially involved with what I would call the *triumph of the grotesque*. This sensation —in keeping with the style of certain dreams—was complicated and exact, allowing no ambiguities or confusions to comfort the dreamer. And what was imparted to my witnessing mind was the vision of a world in a trance—a hypnotized parade of beings sleepwalking to the odious manipulations of their whispering masters, those hooded freaks *who were themselves among the hypnotized*. For there was a power superseding theirs, a power which they served and from which they merely emanated, something which was beyond the universal hypnosis by virtue of its very mindlessness, its awesome idiocy. These cloaked masters, in turn, partook in some measure of godhood, passively presiding as enlightened zombies over the multitudes of the entranced, that frenetic domain of the human.

And it was at this place in my dream that I came to believe that there obtained a terrible intimacy between myself and those whispering effigies of chaos whose existence I dreaded for its very remoteness from mine. Had these beings, for some grim purpose comprehensible only to themselves, allowed me to intrude upon their infernal wisdom? Or was my access to such putrid arcana merely the outcome of some fluke in the universe of atoms, a chance intersection among the demonic elements of which all creation is composed? But the truth was notwithstanding in the face of these insanities; whether by calculation or accident, I was the victim of the unknown. And I succumbed to an ecstatic horror at this insight.

On waking, it seemed that I had carried back with me a tiny, jewel-like particle of this horrific ecstasy, and, by some alchemy of association, this darkly crystalline substance infused its magic into my image of the old town.

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Though I formerly believed myself to be the consummate knower of the town's secrets, the following day was one of unforeseen discovery. The

streets that I looked upon that motionless morning were filled with new secrets and seemed to lead me to the very essence of the extraordinary. A previously unknown element appeared to have emerged in the composition of the town, one that must have been hidden within its most obscure quarters. I mean to say that while these quaint, archaic façades still put on all the appearance of a dreamlike repose, there presently existed, in my sight, evil stirrings beneath this surface. The town had more wonders than I knew, a cache of unwonted offerings stored out of sight. Yet somehow this formula of deception, of corruption in disguise, served to intensify the town's most attractive aspects: a wealth of unsuspected sensations was now provoked by a few slanting rooftops, a low doorway, or a narrow backstreet. And the mist spreading evenly through the town early that morning was luminous with dreams.

The whole day I wandered in a fevered exaltation throughout the old town, seeing it as if for the first time. I scarcely stopped a moment to rest, and I am sure I did not pause to eat. By late afternoon I might also have been suffering from a strain on my nerves, for I had spent many hours nurturing a rare state of mind in which the purest euphoria was invaded and enriched by currents of fear. Each time I rounded a streetcorner or turned my head to catch some beckoning sight, dark tremors were inspired by the hybrid spectacle I witnessed—splendid scenes broken with malign shadows, the lurid and the lovely forever lost in each other's embrace. And when I passed under the arch of an old street and gazed up at the towering structure before me, I was nearly overwhelmed.

My recognition of the place was immediate, though I had never viewed it from my present perspective. Suddenly it seemed I was no longer outside in the street and staring upwards, but was looking down from the room just beneath that peaked roof. It was the highest room on the street, and no window from any of the other houses could see into it. The building itself, like some of those surrounding it, seemed to be empty, perhaps abandoned. I assessed several ways by which I could force entry, but none of these methods was needed: the front door, contrary to my initial observation, was slightly ajar.

The place was indeed abandoned, stripped of wall-hangings and fixtures, its desolate, tunnel-like hallways visible only in the sickly light that shone through unwashed, curtainless windows. Identical windows also appeared on the landing of each section of the staircase that climbed up through the central part of the edifice like a crooked spine. I stood in a near cataleptic

awe of the world I had wandered into, this decayed paradise. It was a venue of strange atmospherics of infinite melancholy and unease, the everlasting residue of some cosmic misfortune. I ascended the stairs of the building with a solemn, mechanical intentness, stopping only when I had reached the top and found the door to a certain room.

And even at the time, I asked myself: could I have entered this room with such unhesitant resolve if I truly expected to find something extraordinary within it? Was it ever my intention to confront the madness of the universe, or at least my own? I had to confess that though I had accepted the benefits of my dreams and fancies, I did not profoundly believe in them. At the deepest level I was their doubter, a thorough skeptic who had indulged a too-free imagination, and perhaps a self-made lunatic.

To all appearances the room was unoccupied. I noted this fact without the disappointment born of real expectancy, but also with a strange relief. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the artificial twilight of the room, I saw the circle of chairs.

They were as strange as I had dreamed, more closely resembling devices of torture than any type of practical or decorative object. Their tall backs were slightly bowed and covered with a coarse hide unlike anything I had ever beheld; their arms were like blades and each had four semicircular grooves cut into them that were spaced evenly across their length; and below were six jointed legs jutting outwards, a feature which transformed each piece into some crablike thing with the apparent ability to scuttle across the floor. If, for a stunned moment, I felt the idiotic desire to install myself in one of these bizarre thrones, this impulse was extinguished upon my observing that the seat of each chair, which at first appeared to be composed of a smooth and solid cube of black glass, was in fact only an open cubicle filled with a murky liquid which quivered strangely when I passed my hand over its surface. As I did this I could feel my entire arm tingle in a way which sent me stumbling backward to the door of that horrible room and which made me loathe every atom of flesh gripping the bones of that limb.

I turned around to exit but was stopped by a figure standing in the doorway. Though I had previously met the man, he now seemed to be someone quite different, someone openly sinister rather than merely enigmatic. When he had disturbed me the day before, I could not have suspected his alliances. His manner had been idiosyncratic but very polite, and he had offered no reason to question his sanity. Now he appeared to be no more than a malignant puppet of madness. From the twisted stance he

assumed in the doorway to the vicious and imbecilic expression that possessed the features of his face, he was a thing of strange degeneracy. Before I could back away from him, he took my trembling hand. “Thank you for coming to visit,” he said in a voice that was a parody of his former politeness. He pulled me close to him; his eyelids lowered and his mouth widely grinned, as if he were enjoying a pleasant breeze on a warm day.

Then he said to me: “They want you with them on their return. They want their chosen ones.”

Nothing can describe what I felt on hearing these words which could only have meaning in a nightmare. Their implications were a quintessence of hellish delirium, and at that instant all the world’s wonder suddenly turned to dread. I tried to free myself from the madman’s grasp, shouting at him to let go of my hand. “*Your* hand?” he shouted back at me. Then he began to repeat the phrase over and over, laughing as if some sardonic joke had reached a conclusion within the depths of his lunacy. In his foul merriment he weakened, and I escaped. As I rapidly descended the many stairs of the old building, his laughter pursued me as hollow reverberations that echoed far beyond the shadowy spaces of that place.

And that freakish, echoing laughter remained with me as I wandered dazed in darkness, trying to flee my own thoughts and sensations. Gradually the terrible sounds that filled my brain subsided, but they were soon replaced by a new terror—the whispering of strangers whom I passed on the streets of the old town. And no matter how low they spoke or how quickly they silenced one another with embarrassed throat-clearings or reproving looks, their words reached my ears in fragments that I was able to reconstruct because of their frequent repetition. The most common terms were *deformity* and *disfigurement*. If I had not been so distraught I might have approached these persons with a semblance of civility, cleared my own throat, and said, “I beg your pardon, but I could not help overhearing … And what exactly did you mean, if I may ask, when you said …” But I discovered for myself what those words meant—*how terrible, poor man*—when I returned to my room and stood before the mirror on the wall, holding my head in balance with a supporting hand on either side.

For only one of those hands was mine.

The other belonged to them.

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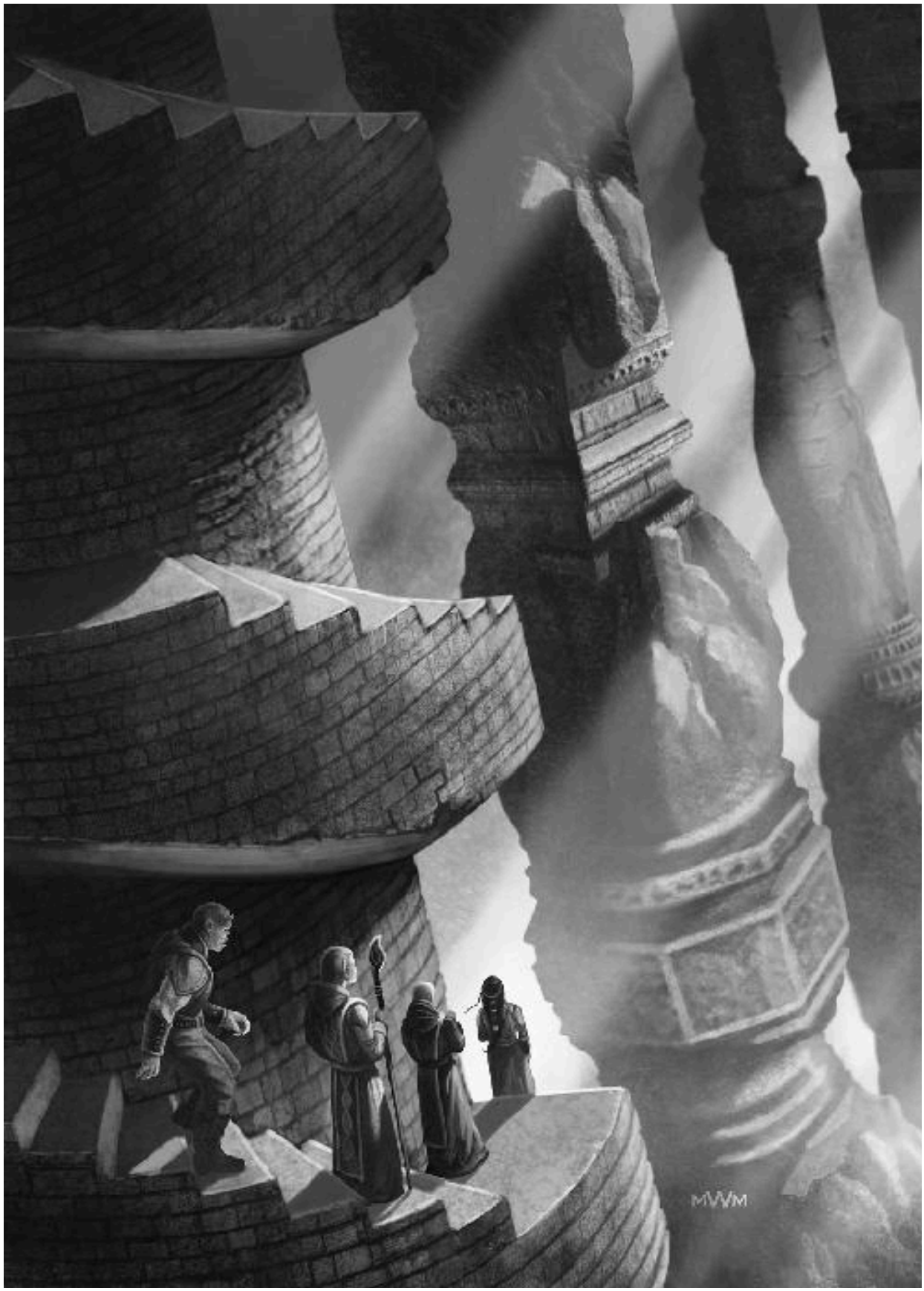
Life is a nightmare that leaves its mark upon you in order to prove that it is, in fact, real. And to suffer a solitary madness seems the joy of paradise when

compared to the extraordinary condition in which one's own madness merely emulates that of the world. I have been lured away by dreams; all is nonsense now.

Let me write, while I still am able, that the transformation has not limited itself. I now find it difficult to continue this manuscript with either hand. These twitching tentacles are not suited for writing in a human manner, and I am losing the will to push my pen across this page. While I have put myself at a great distance from the old town, its influence is undiminished. In these matters there is a terrifying freedom from the recognized laws of space and time. New laws of entity have come to their work as I look helplessly on.

In the interest of others, I have taken precautions to conceal my identity and the precise location of a horror which cannot be helped. Yet I have also taken pains to reveal, as if with malicious intent, the existence and nature of those same horrors. Be that as it may, neither my motives nor my actions matter in the least. They are both well known to the things that whisper in the highest room of an old town. They know what I write and why I am writing it. Perhaps they are even guiding my pen by means of a hand that is an extension of their own. And if I ever wished to see what lay beneath those dark robes, I will soon be able to satisfy this curiosity with only a glance in my mirror.

I must return to the old town, for now my home can be nowhere else. But my manner of passage to that place cannot be the same, and when I enter again that world of dreams it will be by way of a threshold which no human being has ever crossed … nor ever shall.


MVM

MERYPHILLIA

Brian McNaughton

> "For a ghoul is a ghoul, and at best an unpleasant companion for man." – H. P. Lovecraft, *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*

Meryphillia was the least typical ghoul in the graveyard. No man would ever have called her a beauty, but her emaciation was less extreme, her pallor less ghastly, and her gait less grotesque than those of her sisters.

Untypically tender-hearted, she would sometimes shed a tear for a dead infant that her nature compelled her to devour. She was considerate of her fellows, too, and her feeding habits were all but mannerly. Least typical of all, for ghouls love to laugh, was her inextinguishable sorrow for the world of sunlight and human warmth she had lost.

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Traditional wisdom holds that ghouls bring their condition upon themselves by indulging morbid interests in adolescence. Gluttriel, God of Death, takes note of such youngsters and offers them the knowledge of the corpses they will eat in return for their lives.

Others assert that ghoulism is a disease, called Porfat's Distemper after the physician who described it, and who later vanished under circumstances of suggestive peculiarity. Before the transformation becomes obvious to those grieving at the sickbed, their grief compounded by the loved one's growing taste for perverse wit and unseemly laughter, a hunger for dead flesh impels the victim to the nearest burial ground. The first meal induces physical changes that destroy all hope of return to human society.

Either explanation might apply in Meryphillia's case. As a girl nearing womanhood in Crotalorn, she knew the necropolis called Dreamers' Hill better than the malls and ballrooms where her peers flocked. She wandered among the tombs of the rich and the ditches of the poor in all weathers. Her clothing, lacking style to begin with, suffered from these rambles, and it never quite fit: perhaps because a pocket would always be weighted down with a volume of Asteriel Vendren's tales, malign carbuncles of that madman's diseased fancy.

Perched on some collapsed slab that might well have capped a ghoul pit, innocently ascribing the scratches and titters she heard to the creak of trees and rustle of weeds, she would play an air of Umbriel Fronn on her recorder, a cherished gift from her late mother. Often she would pause to ponder questions that the healthy young person is well advised to leave to priests and philosophers.

Her father strove to cure her moping and put some meat on her bones in the hope of marrying her into one of the Great Houses. He would regularly purge her library, castigating her preference for tales of terror to worthwhile literature, for Umbriel's cerebral nocturnes to the cheery ditties of the day. He would pinch her cheeks into smiles as he bellowed for food, wine and happy tunes. Unfortunately his business as a timber merchant kept him often from the city and their home on Hound Square, and Meryphillia would resume her unhealthy habits as soon as he had breezed out the door.

When he held up her stepmother as an example to emulate in his absence, she would only hang her head and mumble. A giddy Frotherine not much older than the girl herself, Meryphillia's father's second wife filled the house with robust athletes and ditty-strummers in what she claimed was an effort to cheer her daughter up. But she never seemed to notice when Meryphillia fled to the nearby cemetery to escape their din and their importunities.

Whether she fled into the arms of Gluttriel, or whether vapors of the corpse-crammed and claw-mined earth afflicted her with Porfat's Distemper, the result was the same: shortly before her eighteenth birthday, she vanished irretrievably into the burrows of the ghouls.

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For all their laughter, ghouls are a dull lot. Hunger is the fire in which they burn, and it burns hotter than the hunger for power over men or for knowledge of the gods in a crazed mortal. It vaporizes delicacy and leaves behind only a slag of anger and lust. They see their fellows as impediments to feeding, to be mauled and shrieked at when the mourners go home. They are seldom alone, not through love of one another's company, but because a lone ghoul is suspected of concealing food. Their copulation is so hasty that distinctions of sex and identity are often ignored.

Just as she had once yearned to know the secrets of the grave, Meryphillia now longed to penetrate the mysteries of friendship and love. Mostly she wanted to know about love. She believed that it must transcend

her bony collisions with Arthrax, least unfeeling of all the male ghouls, whom she untypically clove to.

"Why are you crying?" he once asked while their coupling rattled the slats of a newly emptied coffin.

"It's nothing. Dust in my eyes."

"That happens."

His question and comment were the nearest a ghoul could come to sympathy, but it fell so far short of the standard she imagined to be human that she wept all the more.

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She sought answers from the dead, for the ghoul acquires the memories of what it feeds upon, but her strength was no match for the giants of the underground in the battle for mnemonic bits. Studying human experience from the scraps she got was like learning about painting by spinning on her toes through a museum. She hugged vivid glimpses: the smell of orange spice-cake and a childish song that evoked a long-gone celebration of Polliel's Birthday; the creaking leather and muscular embrace of someone's beloved brother, home safe at last from a forgotten war; a shrine ablaze with stolen candles, a wan face among borrowed blankets, the words, "The fever has broken."

Others did far better. Feeding lustily, they would recall great chunks of lives. For a while they would assume a likeness to their meal and give those satiric impersonations of human beings that are a favorite entertainment of their kind. Even Meryphillia screamed with laughter when Lupox and Glottard disputed which of them was Zuleriel Vogg, the notorious grave-robber, whose execution the ghouls had cheered only less gleefully than the disposal of his pieces in an unguarded pit.

Scroffard once wolfed down an old beggar woman so completely that his performance lost its satirical edge. He alternately whined for spare coins, complained of the dark and damp and smell, and quavered, "Who is that? Who's there?" at every furtive patter and stifled giggle.

Most shunned the mock woman, hoping that Scroffard, when he recovered and found no one else on whom to exercise his temper, would tear off his own head for a change; but Meryphillia, who would formerly have crossed the street to avoid such a wretch, was drawn to caress the fragile face. She seemed beautiful, not least of all for her intensely feeling eyes.

Handicapped with human vision, Scroffard was at first unable to make out the young ghoul by the glow of the niter-crusted tunnel. When he saw what pawed his human face, he screamed his way to the surface, where he was battered about the head by the shovels of two grave-robbers. To their dismay, for they thought they were dealing with the routine nuisance of a prematurely buried hag, the beating restored the most irascible of ghouls to his roaring self. He wrenched from the luckless men the vengeance he might otherwise have wrested from Meryphillia.

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She treasured what happy moments she could retrieve, but murder, disease and madness were the staples of her diet, with the manifold agonies of death for dessert. The fond memories of the rich were locked away in tombs of marble and bronze, while souvenirs of poverty and despair lay everywhere for the taking. The very poorest corpses, unloved, unmourned, unwanted by either medical students or necrophiliacs, were thrown directly into a riddled pit that the gravediggers called Gluttriel's Lunch-Bucket. No matter how full the hole was filled by nightfall, by morning its rocky bottom would be licked clean as a dutiful child's porridge-bowl.

One day word chattered through the mines that a man of substance, sleek as a pig and skewered cleanly in a duel, had just been laid in a plain grave. His widow, no native of Crotalorn, had conceived the notion that its ghouls were a myth. As the box dropped into the earth of an unfashionable quarter, she was overheard to assure the attentive victor in the duel that bronze-bound tombs of stone were vulgar.

No ghoul resumed his sleep that day. The ground of the thrilling burial was too quaggy for tunneling; the meat must be extracted from above. Digging should begin at the first blink of darkness, before human thieves could cheat the underground of its due. As the watchmen would still be reasonably sober, as mourners might be dawdling, the daring of the raiders would set new limits for legend. Debate over tactics grew so heated that the crows of the necropolis took wing and blackened the dome of Ashtareeta's temple, which was seen as a fearful omen by her clergy, and cause for an emergency collection.

Meryphillia knew the debate was a farce. Plans would be trampled in a general stampede for the grave. Her own best hope was to creep out at twilight and work her way among the hedges and headstones until she had found a hiding place near the target. Her intention was not to get there first:

whoever claimed that honor would be run over by a monster like Glottard or Lupox. She would wait for one of them to make his dash and cling to the bristles of his dorsal ridge while he punished the early starters. Sticking close as the warts on his rump, she would snatch what scraps she could.

When the moment came, Clamythia, wiliest of ghouls, usurped the shadow of Lupox. It pained Meryphillia to trip her sister and emboss the mud with her venerable muzzle, but protocol had foundered in howling chaos. Lupox savaged the first arrivals like a fighting-dog set on rats, uncaring that two of the obstructions he flung from his path were human watchmen. Whimpering mindlessly, they left their broken bills where they lay and staggered to the safety of their lodge.

The grave erupted in a fountain of dirt, pumped pluming into the twilight by a frenzy of ghoulish talons. The geyser soon began to spray crushed flowers, splinters of wood, then tattered silk and trinkets of gold that a robber would have wept to see so treated. Without undue effort, Meryphillia found herself hugging a whole quarter of a head, with the coveted eye adhering.

This was the ghoulish equivalent to a delicacy that a banquet-guest would have exclaimed over before daintily sampling; but Meryphillia, with claws scraping her back, elbows gouging her ribs and jaws stretching over her shoulders to seize her prize, could only stuff it into her mouth, grind it hastily, and gulp it down.

Hunched between Lupox's gnarly knees, she then beheld the strangest vision: of herself, standing up straight, as her father had so often told her to; with her hair pushed out of her eyes, as he had so often pushed it; and with an unlikely smile dimpling cheeks not nearly so gaunt as they had been. The vision glowed with love, tinged only slightly by the acid of vexation and fixed forever beneath a glaze of sorrow.

She realized whose grave she crouched in, but, being what she was, could only scrabble for more and leave her feelings to sort themselves out. Her next find was a hand, one that held a far clearer imprint of her stepmother's buttocks. It proved a timely antidote to the first course.

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In her preoccupation with life, Meryphillia relapsed into her solitary ways. She was allowed to. No one suspected her of hiding food. The ghouls thought her as odd as humans once had. Like them, her new companions

were grateful for a respite from her brooding silences, her inappropriate observations and her reluctance to join in a good laugh.

Lurching one night along a path she used to glide with her recorder, she nearly stumbled over a man who had come neither to loot tombs nor kill himself. He was declaiming verses to the full moon with such rapt fervor that he failed to notice her slip hastily into the tent of a willow's branches.

This was the poet Fragador, which she learned from his own lips, for he gave himself credit for each poem as if afraid the moon would confuse him with someone else: "*On the Hands of Therissa Sleith*, a sonnet by Fragador of Fandragord," he would announce, or, "*For Therissa Sleith on Her Birthday*, an ode by Fragador, poet and tragedian, lately of Fandragord."

It would be an unobservant moon indeed, she thought, that would forget his name. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen; but she viewed him with the eyes of a ghoul, unaware that many people thought him ghoulishly pale and thin. Her heart, so still even before her present state, startled her like a hammering visitor at her breast.

His subject pleased less than his voice. Therissa Sleith was the darling of Crotalorn, and had often been held up to her as an example of what she was not. Fragador desired her as ardently, though perhaps not quite so hopelessly, as Meryphillia desired him.

He visited the graveyard as often as she used to, and always with a new batch of poems praising the wit, grace and beauty of the same unsuitable person. When the moon had other obligations, he would recite his verses to a statue of Filloweela that reclined complaisantly on one of her cleric's tombs, unaware that the lavish form of the goddess hid a quivering horror that yearned to give him everything Therissa withheld.

How she loathed that name! It figured in every verse he wrote, and his voice would falter and throb on its shaky nastiness. She learned to anticipate its occurrence, and she would whisper her own name just loudly enough to bar the syllables from her ears, even though this lamed his elegant scansion. Sometimes she would speak too vehemently, and he would clear his throat, clean his ear, or peer uneasily into the shadows.

His heart heard her name imperfectly, however, for one night he thrilled her by declaiming a poem to "Morthylla," whom his poetic intuition identified as a lurking spirit of night and death, and whose help he invoked in softening Therissa before her lithe limbs should go to feed the ghouls.

Meryphillia would recite the lines to herself while wishing that those limbs were in fact within reach of her coffin-cracking jaws.

They were so alike, or had been, she and Fragador, with their delight in horror, their flirtation with death, their love of shadow and solitude. If only she had met him—but she withered her wish: even if she had stood up straight and combed her hair, even if she had twittered pleasantries and smiled now and then, no man drawn to the pert face and nubile form of Therissa Sleith would have spared her a glance.

His verses swerved into delirium when the cruel ninny was betrothed to another. The corruption that had always festered beneath his sunniest images tore off its mask as he raved of murder and suicide. Not just a beautiful man, not merely a gifted poet, he was a genius, Meryphillia avowed, one who gazed even more deeply into the abyss than had Asteriel Vendren. She loved him, she worshiped him, and now that the incongruous object of his desire had shown herself an even worse fool than had been obvious, she timidly hoped for him. She hardly ate, she never slept, she grew so listless that rats began to eye her with an impudent surmise. She pictured her brain as crawling with busy ants, each ant a notion for declaring her love, until she could have smashed her skull to exterminate them.

The full moon returned, but the poet did not. She fretted, pacing from the favored statue to the willow and back again. At last she broke the circle and loped to the main gate, to the very fringe of life and light. Springing atop the wall, she peered up and down Citron Street, then leaned perilously far to scan Hound Square, descrying no one but unremarkable stragglers and lurkers. So great was her concern for her beloved that the sight of her festively lit home, the first she had had of it since her transformation, gave her no slightest pang.

The first note of a shriek told her she had been seen, but she slipped into the darkness so swiftly that it lost conviction and ended as an embarrassed laugh.

She feared that Fragador had made good the threat of his latest poems and killed himself, but her fear was superseded by fearful desire. She had longed for union with him. What union could be more complete than to be the man himself?

His grumbled asides had told her that he would be granted no impregnable crypt. She would raid his grave at high noon to beat the greater

ghouls to his dear relics. Watchmen be damned! What finer way to end her hated existence than in the form of her love, to remember the pain of his death even as she saw her own coming, and saw it coming through his very eyes? No passion had ever been so fully consummated. It would cry out in vain for the immortalizing pen of Fragador.

Fatigued, distraught, but now ever so dimly cheered, she found her way to his favorite tomb and lay down in the moon-shadow of the Goddess of Love, where she slept.

She was woken by sobbing so bitter that she thought it must be her own. The fat and ruddy moon had decayed to a ghoulish disc above her. Rubbing her eyes, she felt no tears, but the sobs continued. It was he, and her joy nearly drove her to embrace him before she thought what effect this might produce.

"Ghouls!" he suddenly screamed. "Fiends and demons of the dark, attend me! Morthylla, come to me!"

Before others could respond, she rose.

"By Cludd!" he gagged, and half his sword appeared like silver lightning from its scabbard. In a like flash, she saw herself in his loathing grimace. A wheel revolved ponderously inside her, leaving something crushed. She crossed her hands to her shoulders and hung her head in suppliance.

"I did call you," he said after a long silence. "Your promptness startled me."

"Forgive me."

"Offense and forgiveness have no meaning, for meaning itself is nonsense. Therissa Sleith is no more."

"I'm sorry," she lied.

"You would be, of course. Not even a ghoul's dream could penetrate the sepulcher of the Sleiths."

She looked up to protest this misunderstanding, but his face silenced and melted her. Something like wonder crossed it as he saw her eyes. Her father had always praised them as her best feature, and now they were the most vividly yellow globes in the underground.

"Are you really …?" he began. "No, it would be mad to ask if you are a symptom of my madness."

"You are the sanest man since Asteriel Vendren."

"Sleithreethra spare us from literate ghouls!"

She shuddered. Not even a ghoul would speak the name of that Goddess in a graveyard at midnight, and certainly not with a laugh. He was indeed mad, and it thrilled her. No more to be held than a sob or a last breath, it burst out: “I love you!”

He stepped forward boldly. “Come down from the tomb, then, Morthylla, and let us speak of love.”

Her claws clicked with their shaking until they rested in his firm clasp. She whispered, “Don’t mock me.” She added, “And it’s *Meryphi*llia.”

Correction seemed to irk him, but he took it. “I have heard that a ghoul who eats the heart and brain of a person becomes that person.”

“I have seen it.”

“I mean no offense, but this restoration would have no added characteristics? No redundancy of teeth, no odor, no urge to laugh at odd moments?”

She averted her misting eyes. “The personation is perfect.” She flared. “My odor offends you?”

She was instantly sorry, having forgotten that her new face and voice translated petulance as demoniacal fury.

“Please,” he said when he could speak again. “I meant nothing like that. A dead body, you know. You have an inner beauty, Meryphillia. I see it through your eyes.”

“Really?”

“Please don’t laugh, I’m unused to it.” She was unaware that she had laughed. He thrilled her by taking her hand in both of his. “Dear ghoul, I have acquired the key to the tomb of the Sleiths, where Therissa will be interred tomorrow. I wish you to do with her as we said.”

“But that’s monstrous!”

His look clearly told her that the word was inappropriate on her nominal lips, but she pressed on: “She would be just as she was in life. If she denied you then—”

“Her parents denied me, her position denied me, her name denied me; never her heart. If she had but one hour, she might listen to her heart. If I could have a word with her, a look—dare I hope for a kiss?”

A perverse impulse to refuse seized her. She desired him as she had never desired anyone, but the price he demanded, to transform herself into the sort of person her father and stepmother had wanted her to be, seemed too high.

“Please, Meryphillia,” he murmured, and he shocked her by touching his lips to her cheek.

She took the key he pressed into her calloused palm.

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Near the hour of the tryst, she crept through the flowering precincts of the richest tombs with ghoulish stealth, which makes the hovering owl seem rowdy. Her ears were extended to gather the whispers of moths and the mutter of coffin-worms. Her nasal pits gaped to the fullest, so that each encrypted corpse around her, however desiccated by ages uncounted, announced its discrete presence: none more brightly than that of Therissa Sleith, its decay just a sigh beneath the salt tears and scented soaps of the servants who had primped her for the last time.

No other ghouls blighted the air with their rancid breath, nor watchmen with their wine, but she crept nonetheless, horrified by a vision of the underground host bursting over her to fill the tomb of the Sleiths, ransacking bones inviolate for a thousand years and scattering Therissa’s shreds into a thousand greedy gullets. If that happened, she could never face Fragador. No, she would creep up from behind, fight down her distaste for unripe flesh, and eat him. Denied the looks and sighs and touches of his love, she would at least know him from the inside of his being.

She rose to her full height only in the shadow of the doorway, where the terrible motto of Therissa’s tribe was incised beneath an image of Sleithreethra: WHO TOYS WITH US, SHE SHALL FONDLE. The brass key that Fragador had given her slipped from quivering fingers to clatter as loudly, it seemed, as the head of a watchman’s bill, nor could her scrabbling claws at once fit themselves to the human device. She was sobbing with frustration by the time she succeeded in juggling it up to the keyhole and jamming it in.

The bronze leaves swung inward on oiled hinges. The chain to a gong in the tower had been cut by a watchman with a taste for Fragador’s poetry and an even greater gusto for opium, who had been persuaded that the poet contemplated no unusual indecencies with the dead darling of Crotalorn.

She was lovely, Meryphillia had to admit when she had ripped the massive lid from the sarcophagus, especially now that the pink tinge of her skin had been replaced with hints of violet. The fatal twist of her head had been all but straightened; she could have been a sleeper who would wake with nothing to complain of but a stiff neck.

She paused for a moment to admire that elfin nose, so unlike the assertive one she had worn, before biting it off. Uncoiling her razorish tongue, she slipped it in to shred the brain into manageable morsels. Dainty swirls of her smallest claw served to scoop out the eyes. She savored them with restrained whimpers of pleasure before proceeding to the large and tasty breasts.

Therissa heard her sisters chattering as they returned from the regimental review of Cludd's Whirlwind. It was their custom to tease the Holy Soldiers with inviting smiles and restless wiggles. The celibate warriors were charged to be on their sternest behavior, and the girls' object was to make one drop his pike or, worse, raise his staff, offenses that earned the culprit a flogging and a night spent kneeling on pebbles. Why had Meryphillia never had such fun, never even thought of it? She almost wept for her wasted life before recalling that she had done it, as Therissa Sleith.

Ripping down to bare ribs, she opened them like a book: the Book of Love. She gobbled the tough, lean heart.

How that heart had leaped when, whirling at the head of the stairs to show off her bridal gown, Therissa had felt the hem snag her heel! The floor tilted, the ceiling spun, but she was spared from terror by the knowledge that this could never happen to her. Even if it did (and there could be no doubt that she was plunging headlong down the stairs) she would suffer only inconvenient bruises. She pitied the chorus of screamers. She wanted to assure them that she was Therissa Sleith, whose youth and beauty were invulnerable, who was dead.

Meryphillia raged at the unfairness, the tiresome untimeliness. Most of all she regretted the graceless exit she had made, and right in front of her sisters, of all people. Examining these thoughts, she knew that the moment was upon her, and she rushed her meal. She had hardly started on the tangy kidneys when she glanced at her hand and was shaken by that mixture of emotions few other creatures can know.

The sight of her own hand sickened her, its tiny, maggot-plump fingers so unlike the talons she had grown used to. At the same time Therissa gagged with loathing to see what her dainty hand clutched, what smeared her arm to the elbow.

It took more than a moment to calm themselves. Therissa accepted her death more gracefully than Meryphillia did the alien will that made her wash in the wine and oil provided for a differently envisioned afterlife.

Drying herself on an unsullied corner of her gown, Therissa scolded her for not having taken better care of it, for now they had nothing to wear. The ghoul was reminded of her stepmother.

Therissa unwound the clattering bones of an ancient Sleith from their wrapping and swirled it around her. She succeeded in looking more stylish than Meryphillia once would have in her newest clothes.

"I believe in making do," Therissa said. "Even if I were a filthy ghoul, I'd make the best of it. And I don't want to waste my brief resurrection moping in a smelly tomb, so let's go, shall we?"

Part of her wanted to linger over her unfinished remains, but another part refused even to look into the sarcophagus, and both were parts of the same person: who called herself, in her inmost thoughts, Therissa Sleith, but who felt an almost uncontrollable urge to laugh when she did.

Fragador had sacrificed for it and fully expected it, but Therissa's emergence from the tomb shocked him speechless. She tossed her hair in exactly that heart-stopping way of hers and gazed around the cemetery before spotting him in the shadow of a stone demon. When her face lit up, his heart woke like a sunrise choir of birds.

"You're not dead!" He laughed wildly. "I knew they had to be wrong, you …"

The pity in her eyes stopped him even before she said, "No, they were right. Nor am I entirely as I seem."

"Nerythillia?"

"Please get her name right. Her love for you makes mine seem shallow."

Love had brought him here, yes, but anger, too, anger with her for slavishly heeding the rules of society; anger with himself for breaking those rules by being poor, and a poet. She had planned to marry a man who had won a contract to build public conveniences for the city.

"You can't wear sonnets or eat odes," she had said, "but you can build a fragrant palace from urinals."

In his maddest moments, he had wanted to resurrect her so he could strangle her. At very least he had meant to ask her, with a suitable flourish at the moon-blazing marble of her tomb, what she thought of her fragrant palace now. In the presence of wonder, however, spite was impossible.

And there was that other to consider, that monstrous but magical being that animated her. In a strange part of himself, he loved her even more than

Therissa. Unlike Therissa, she appreciated his art. She had even compared him to Asteriel Vendren, whom the dear, dead dunce had never heard of.

"Meryphillia," he enunciated clearly as he took her into his arms.

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Now that she had known the soft sighs and shouted transports of human love, Meryphillia wept more bitterly than ever her exile to the underground.

"Why are you crying?" Fragador asked tenderly.

"Nothing. Dust in my eyes."

"That happens," he said from the depth of his human wisdom and sympathy, and she wept all the more.

"What if I was vain and frivolous by your absurd standards?" said the voice in her head. "I knew life and love and happiness. Now I shall know peace. Will you ever say such things?"

She was unsure whether those were the words of the fast-fading Therissa or the words she would have put into her mouth. Whatever they were, they bit like truth.

She rose before the transformation could become complete, unwilling to show her true form again to the poet and blight his memory of love. Turning for one last look, she found herself staring into the grinning face of Arthrax.

"Now I can write poems for you," he said. "*We shall know what the darkness discovers*—how's that for a start?"

The sight of him had speeded Therissa's evaporation. Meryphillia scanned the necropolis with all her senses for Fragador, but he, too, had vanished. She demanded, "What have you done with him? Where is he?"

"He contracted with two of us," Arthrax said. "You, last night. Me, tonight, just before he drank poison." He grimaced so horribly that even she retreated.

She had learned from Therissa. No longer inclined to weep, she turned and smiled at the gaping, unguarded sepulcher of the Great House of Sleith. Far off she heard the cackling of creatures like herself borne on the night wind, and for the first time she held back nothing as she joined in their laughter.

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THE PEDDLER'S TALE; OR, ISOBEL'S REVENGE

Caitlín R. Kiernan

"If you are very sure that's the story you wish to hear," said the peddler, the seller of notions and oddments, to the tow-headed girl child who called her Aunty. They were not related, by blood nor marriage, but very many people in Ulthar called the peddler Aunt or Aunty or the like. Few people living knew her right name or her history. Most felt it impolite to ask, and she never volunteered the information.

"You should be certain, and then be *certain* you're certain, before I begin. I've come a long, long way. And tomorrow I leave the city and will not soon return. So, be sure this is the tale you wish to hear."

"Aunty, I very certain," said the girl impatiently, and the other two children—both boys—agreed. "I have no doubt whatsoever."

"Well, then," said the old woman who wasn't her aunt. She sat back in her chair and lit her pipe, then squinted through grey smoke at the youngsters who'd arranged themselves on the floor between her and the crackling hearth fire. Also, there were five cats, none of whom seemed the least bit interested in peddlers' yarns.

She took a deep pull on her pipe, then began.

"You've all heard the name of the King of Bones, and you've heard the tales of how he came to power. And of his Queen, his twin sister, Isobel."

The children nodded eagerly. And the peddler paused, because she knew that the making of beginnings is, as many have noted, a matter not to be undertaken lightly. And, too, the girl had requested of her a very grim tale, which made the beginning that much more delicate an undertaking. The old woman watched her audience, and they watched her right back. She was well versed at hiding exhaustion, disguising an aching back and sore feet behind a pleasant demeanor, not letting on how her weary sinews wished for the rare luxury of a soft mattress. Duty before rest. This tale was the price of her night's lodging and board, and she was a woman who paid her debts.

Shortly after dawn, the peddler had led the strong draught pony that pulled her wagon over the ancient stone bridge spanning the River Skai, that wild path of meltwater gurgling down from the glaciers girdling Mount Lerion and flowing northwards towards the Cerenarian Sea. She'd lingered a while on the bridge, admiring the early autumn sunrise, the clean smell of the river, and the view to the east. This was always a welcome sight, the cottages and farms speckling the hills beyond the bridge. Behind her lay Nir and Hatheg, neither of which had proven as profitable as she'd hoped. With so many merchants and craftsmen—and it seemed there were more every year—few in the villages and cities had use for a traveling tinker and a seller of oddments and notions, a peddler of medicinals and salves, a woman up to almost any menial job for a few coins. She'd become an anachronism, but at so advanced an age it was hardly practical to seek some other more lucrative trade.

Out beyond the farmland, just visible in a gauzy mist starting to burn away beneath the new day, she had been able to discern the suburbs of Ulthar. She was born in the town and hoped to spend her last years there, fate willing. She did not ever think *gods willing*, as she had long since learned the folly and dangers of placing one's hope in the hands of gods and things that fancy themselves gods.

"Isobel and Isaac, the earthborn ghouls," said the girl, prompting the peddler to continue.

"Yes, well," said the peddler. "But they were not true and proper ghouls, only mongrels, birthed of a mostly human mother. They were fair, some even say beautiful to behold, their skin white as milk, their eyes clear and blue as sapphires. Their Ghūl heritage barely showed, excepting in their appetites and ruthlessness. Still, they wished to rule as ghouls. By the procurement of a powerful, terrible artifact, they raised an army and threw down the rightful King and Queen of Bones and Rags, and—"

"The *Qqi d'Tashiva* and *Qqi Ashz'sara*," the tow-headed girl interrupted. "And the artifact is the Basalt Madonna—*Qqi d'Evai Mubadieb*—and, Aunty, I've heard—"

The old woman raised an eyebrow and scowled, silencing the girl.

"Now, which of us is telling this tale?" she asked. "And, besides, I'd not guess your ma and pa would think so highly of your palavering in the corpse tongue."

One of the cats, a fat tabby tom, leapt into the peddler's lap, stretched, then curled up for a nap. She stroked its head. In her wanderings far and wide from the cobblestone streets of radiant Ulthar, the cats were, perhaps, what she missed above all else. For an age, the citizens of the city had been forbidden to harm any cat for any reason, upon pain of death or banishment. There were not many laws of man she counted wise and unquestionably just, but that surely was one of the few.

"Yes. Those were the titles that the Snow twins took for themselves when all the forces of Thok had fallen before them and the fire they wielded, after even the city of the gugs and the vaults of Zin lay at their feet, after even the great flocks of night gaunts had surrendered. In the days that followed the war, when I was only a very small girl myself, there was fear even here that Isaac Snow might not be content to rule the shadows of the Lower Dream Lands, that he might have greater ambitions and rise up against the world of men.

"You know, of course, no such thing happened. We'd not be sitting here, me telling you this story, if matters had gone that way. We were, all of us, fortunate, for many are the generals who'd believed the might of the twins was so awful that none could ever stand against it. It is written that the Snows were content to remain below, and that they still—to this day—rule over and enslave the creatures of the Lower Dream Lands."

"But—" began the tow-headed girl, and this time the peddler interrupts her.

"But, child, though this is what most count as the truth, there are those who whisper a secret history of the Ghūl Wars. And if this *other* account is to be believed—and I warrant there are a few priests and scholars who will swear that it is so—the twins were never of one mind. Indeed, it is said that Isaac greatly feared his sister, for the same prophecy that had foretold their victory also spoke of the birth of a daughter to them."

"He feared his own child?" asked the boy seated to the tow-headed girl's right.

"He did."

"But why?" the boy asked.

"If you'll kindly stop asking questions, I was, as it happens, coming to that."

The peddler chewed the stem of her pipe a moment and stroked the tabby tom's head. It purred, and she briefly considered changing horses in the

middle of this stream and *insisting* they hear some other tale, one not populated with ghouls, half-ghouls, and moldering necropoleis, and not a tale of war and the horrors of war. Likely, if she continued, it would end in nightmares for her and the children both. The plains of Pnath and the peaks of Thok might lie far away, and the battles in question long ago, but neither space nor time, she knew, could be depended upon to hold phantoms at bay.

Still, this was the tale they'd asked for, and this was the tale she'd promised, and the peddler was not a woman to go back on her word.

"The prophecy," she continued, "had been passed down since the ghouls were defeated by the Djinn and cast out of the wastes of the Arabian deserts into the Lower Dream Lands, so thrice a million years before the first city of humankind was built. It foretold that someday a daughter would be born to half-ghoul twins, half-*modab* albino twins, and this daughter would grow to be a savior, a messiah, who'd be more powerful by far than even her terrible parents. She would, so said the prophecy, lead the Ghūl through the Enchanted Wood and up the seven hundred steps to the Gates of Deeper Slumber and through the gates into the Waking World. Once above, the mighty Djinn would find their doom by the same hellish weapon her mother and father had wielded in Thok. But …"

And here the peddler paused for effect and puffed at her pipe a moment. The air in the room had gone as taut as a harp string, and the three children leaned very slightly forward.

"But?" whispered the tow-headed girl.

"But," continued the peddler, smoke leaking from her nostrils, "the rise of the ghouls would also be the downfall of the father of their champion. Because first, or so went the prophecy, the daughter would have to murder the father and claim both thrones for herself. She would spare her mother, but never again would there be a king and a queen in Thok. Those immemorial titles would vanish into memory and then pass from all recollection.

"The King of Bones and Rags, he did believe the prophecy, for, after all, had it not foretold of his and his sister's birth and their coming to the Underworld and of their ascension? Sure it had, and if that portion of it was not false than how could he *not* fear those passages that had yet to be realized? Sure he was terrified, because even so great a monster as he may fear his own undoing at the hands of such unfathomable mysteries as soothsaying. And, what's more, he soon learned that Isobel Siany Snow—

for that was her earthborn name in full, given by their mother Hera—that Queen Isobel was already pregnant. That she had become so shortly before the war began, when she and he were hardly more than storm clouds gathering on the horizon."

And here the peddler departed briefly from her simple narrative, for the bare bones of a tale are a dull affair and should be dressed appropriately in the attire of atmosphere and the garb of mood. Too easily might this story become a dry recitation of *perhaps it was, and so they say*, and *might have been*. So, with words she deftly painted images of the perpetual twilight that lay over the dreaded Vale of Pnath, where gigantic bholes burrowed through unplumbed strata of gnawed bones heaped into the wide valley. She told of towering forests of phosphorescent fungi that pressed in all about the borders of that land in the shadow of the ragged peaks of Thok, mountains so lofty they reached almost to the rocky, stalactite-festooned ceiling of the Lower Dream Lands. It was the ghouls, she explained, who'd made Pnath a plain of dry ribs and broken skulls, for they'd spent untold years tossing the leavings of their unspeakable feasts over the cliffs into the abyss below. In those lands, the peddler assured them, every breath of air was redolent of death and rot. For it was the realm of the grave. It was the abode of nightmares beyond reckoning.

"Oh, and the ghasts," she nodded. "I shouldn't neglect to mention them. Terrible, vile, creeping beasts with a bite so venomous none can survive it. The gugs, the architects of Zin, hunted them, and probably hunt them still. But the gugs fear them as well."

Now the eyes of the children were wide, and occasionally they glanced over their shoulders towards the fire or upwards at the autumn night pressing against the windows of the room.

"Oh, but I *have* strayed terribly, haven't I," said the peddler, and she frowned and knitted her brows, feigning mild exasperation with herself. "Must be the wind brushing around the eaves of the house making my mind wander so."

"Aunty, we don't mind," the tow-headed girl whispered, and the other children nodded in unison.

"That's all well and good, but, we'll be here until cock's crow if I keep nattering on that way. Where was I?"

"Isobel was already pregnant," said the boy who'd spoken before.

“Yes. Yes, that was it. Isobel, the Queen of Bones and Rags, was pregnant by her brother, and when Isaac Glyndwr Snow learned this he feared it would be the death of him. Everything was unfolding precisely as the prophecy had promised. For the first time ever he grew distant from his sister and withdrew from her, becoming ever more secretive, spending long hours alone or in the company of his concubines. He took to drink and to chasing the Dragon, trying to smother his worries in the embrace of opium. As Isobel’s belly swelled, *his* scheming, anxious mind swelled with plots and designs by which he might prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy and cheat his own undoing.

“He would kill his sister. Yes. That’s exactly what he *had* to do. Even though he truly did love Isobel, and even though he knew full well he’d never, ever, *ever* love another woman, he had to do murder against her. Because, you see, he loved himself far more. Still, the King of Bones also understood that he must take care to proceed with the utmost caution. For though it was true there was no end of ghouls so fanatically loyal to him they’d gladly turn assassin even against their queen, it was also true he had enemies. The inhabitants of Thok were, by large, a conquered, broken lot, and many were the ghouls who despised the twins and named them usurpers and conspired in secret, drawing plots against the Crown. Isaac Snow’s advisors warned him even the fires of the Basalt Madonna might not save him should there be open revolt. For, before, he and Isobel had possessed the element of surprise. They’d never have that advantage again.

“Worse, there were rumors that some among the dissidents had begun making sacrifices to—well, I’ll not say *that* name here, but I mean the dæmon sultan who serves the blind, insane chaos at the center of the universe. No one ought *ever* speak that name.”

The children looked disappointed, and the tow-headed girl muttered to herself.

“Anyway, the King of Bones had made up his mind,” continued the peddler, “and nothing could dissuade him from the cold and heartless resolve of his decision. He would see Isobel dead, and he chose the method, and he chose the hour. It was with an especial shame that he cowardly set another to the task. At first he’d intended to do the deed himself, which only seemed right and good to his twisted ideas of right and good. But his advisors convinced him it was much more prudent to *order* her death by another’s hand. Then, afterwards, he could have the killer tried and publicly

executed, and there would be fewer questions about the queen's sad fate. If it were discovered that the *Qqi d'Tashiva* had murdered the mother of the child who would deliver all Ghūl-kind and lead them to victory against the Djinn—"

"There'd have been a terrible count of angry ghouls," the tow-headed girl said.

The peddler nodded, not bothering to complain about yet another interruption.

"Indeed. It's no small thing to destroy the hope of an entire people, even if the people are so foul a bunch as the ghouls."

One of the children yawned, and the peddler asked, "Should I stop here? It's getting late, after all, and you three by rights should be in your beds."

"No, Aunty, please," said the tow-headed girl, and she thumped the boy who'd yawned smartly on the back of his head. "We're not tired, not at all. Please, do go on."

"Please," murmured the boy who'd yawned, who was now busy rubbing his head.

"Very well then," said the peddler, and she set her pipe aside, for it had gone out partway through her description of the Lower Dream Lands. "So, the king commanded that his sister die, and he chose the ghoul who would cut her throat while she slept. He told none but those closest to him, a handful whom he trusted and believed were beyond any act of treachery. But he was mistaken. The *Qqi Ashz'sara* was every bit as wicked and distrustful and perfidious as her brother, and she'd taken precautions. She'd placed a spy, a ghoul named Sorrow, within her brother's inner circle. Sorrow was as noble a ghoul as a ghoul may be, which is to say not particularly, but he was in love with his queen, and Isobel did not doubt that he would gladly perish to protect her, should it come to that."

"That's a very strange name," said the tow-headed girl.

"He was a ghoul," replied the peddler. "Would you expect he'd be named George or Juan Carlos or maybe Aziz? His name was Sorrow, a name he'd found on a gravestone stolen from a cemetery in the World Above and brought into the World Below."

"But you said," cut in the boy who'd yawned, "you told us that the Djinn had banished the Ghūl to—"

"—as a whole, yes. I said that, and they did. However, always have there been those few who braved the wrath of the Djinn, hiding among women

and men of the Waking World, infesting catacombs and cemeteries."

"Oh," said the boy, clearly confused.

"As I was saying," the peddler began again, "Isobel Snow trusted this one ghoul to bring her word of her brother's doings, and as soon as Sorrow learned of the plot to murder the queen, he scampered back to her with the news."

"Scampered?" asked the tow-headed girl.

"Yes. Scampered. Ghouls do that. They lope and they creep and they scamper. And as the latter is the more expedient means of getting about, Sorrow *scampered* back to Isobel to warn her she and her unborn child were in very terrible danger. Isobel listened, not desiring to believe it was true, but also never supposing that it wasn't. The twins were, as is generally the case with twins, two peas from the same ripe pod, and she admitted to Sorrow that in her brother's place she likely would have made the same decision. Sorrow advised her that she had two options. She could try and make a stand, possibly rallying the very ghouls who would see the King and Queen both deposed, currying their favor with promises that she would abdicate and by pointing out that she was, after all, the mother of the prophesied messiah. Or she could run."

"I'd have run," said the boy who'd yawned.

"But you're a poltroon," replied the boy on the tow-headed girl's right. "You always run from a fight."

"Yes, well, have you never heard that discretion is the better part of valor? The greater wisdom lies in knowing when the odds are not in your favor, and Isobel Snow knew the odds were not in hers. So she dispatched Sorrow to enlist the aid of another earthborn ghoul, one who had once been a man of the Waking World, a man named Richard Pickman. In the century since Pickman had arrived in Thok, he'd risen to a station of some prominence among the ghouls, and during the Ghūl War he'd fought against the Snows. Afterwards, he'd gone into hiding, but Sorrow knew his whereabouts, and he knew also that Pickman possessed the influence to arrange the queen's hasty escape, and that for the right price he would help."

"But wasn't he afraid?" asked the tow-headed girl.

"Undoubtedly, but he didn't believe the prophecy and was convinced that the coming of the albino twins was no more than a coincidence. He was of the opinion that the two were grifters and humbugs who'd seen a chance to

exploit ignorance and superstition, and they'd seized it. He certainly did not believe that the infant who'd be born of their union would be the ghouls' deliverance. In fact, Richard Pickman doubted that there ever had been a war with the Djinn. He was a heretic of the first order, an unbeliever through and through. It wasn't that he was sympathetic to Isobel's plight. No. More that he was convinced that as long as her child lived, Isaac Snow would be weakened by his fear of their offspring. And, too, Pickman conjured that the brother's confidence would be weakened if he failed to murder his sister. Neither of the Snows were accustomed to failure.

"They were extremely arrogant," said the boy who'd yawned. He rubbed at his eyes and petted a ginger kitten that was curled on the floor near him.

"Sure he was," nodded the peddler, "and more than words ever can convey. It did not cross his mind that his plot would be foiled, once he set it in motion. They say that the first thing he felt upon receiving the news that one of his confidants, a ghoul named Sorrow—and *not* George or Juan Carlos or maybe Aziz—had lain in wait for the King's butcher and gotten the upper hand, the very first expression Isaac Snow's face showed that night was not rage, but amazement that he could possibly have failed."

"Serves him right," says the tow-headed girl.

The peddler shrugged. "Perhaps, if one excuses Isobel her own crimes and makes of her a hero merely because she'd fallen out of favor with her brother. Regardless, after the assassin was slain, Pickman, Sorrow, and several other ghouls led her from the palace and out of Thok, down narrow mountain trails and across the bhole-haunted Vale of Pnath. At last they gained the vaults of ruined Zin, that haunted city of the gugs, and went straightaway to a mighty central tower, the tallest among twice a hundred towers so tall no one could, from the ground, ever hope to glimpse the tops of those spires. They pushed open its enormous doors, which bore the sigil of Koth—a dreadful, awful bas-relief neither Isobel Snow nor Sorrow dared gaze upon—and I should tell you, children, that the history of that tower is a shuddersome tale on its own right, one all but lost to antiquity."

"Maybe you'll tell it next time," said the boy on the tow-headed girl's left.

"Maybe," replied the peddler. "We shall see. Anyhow, beyond that forbidding entryway was a stair that wound up and up and up … and *up* … to a massive trapdoor carved of slick black stone. It is said two hard days' climbing were necessary to at last reach the top of those stairs and that the

strength of all the ghouls present was only *barely* enough to lift open that trapdoor. But open it they did, and so it was that Isobel Snow, Queen of Bones and Rags, *Qqi Ashz'sara*, slipped through her brother's icy fingers and fled to the Upper Dream Lands. Of the ghouls, only Sorrow went with her, the others turning back with Richard Pickman, who, as I've said, hoped her escape would be the beginning of the end for Isaac Snow's reign. Pickman had instructed Sorrow to lead the Queen in Exile through the Enchanted Wood to the River Xari, where a barge would be waiting to bear them down to the port city of Jaren, from whence they could book safe passage across the shimmering sea to Serannian. Sure, even Isaac Snow would never be half so bold as to venture so many leagues from the Underworld, much less attempt to breach the high walls of the island kingdom of Serannian."

"The people of Serannian let them enter?" the tow-headed girl asked skeptically. "A ghoul and an albino half ghoul?"

"You'd not think so, would you? But, see, the lords of Serannian were kindly," answered the peddler. "And as I have told you, there were generals and leaders of men who'd learned of the Snow's discovery of the long lost *Qqi d'Evai Mubadieb* and of the strife that followed, and how they feared the twins might not be content to rule the Lower Dream Lands. So they saw the arrival of Isobel Snow and news of the division between king and queen as a good omen, indeed. Moreover, there is a thing I have not yet revealed, probably the most important part of the tale, the pivot on which turns its plot."

Each of the four children sat up a little straighter at that, for how could anything be more important than the ghoul queen's flight?

"When Isobel Snow departed the peaks of Thok and the palaces of the royal necropolis, she took with her the Basalt Madonna."

There was a collective gasp from the peddler's audience, and she felt the smallest rind of satisfaction at that. If she had to tell this story, at least the gravity of it was not being lost on the listeners, and at least she knew she was not slipping in her skill as a spinner of yarns. She wanted to rekindle her pipe, but this was no place to interrupt herself. She was getting very near the end.

"But if she had the weapon, why did she not turn it against her brother?" asked the boy on the tow-headed girl's right.

“I don’t know,” said the peddler. “No one knows, no one now living. Perhaps she didn’t fully comprehend how, or possibly she was unable to use the Madonna without him. It may have required the two of them together. Or perhaps she simply loved Isaac too much to destroy him.”

“Or she was afraid,” whispered the boy who’d yawned.

“Or that,” said the peddler. “Whatever the reason, she didn’t use it against him. She carried it away with her, and by the time Isaac Snow discovered this she was far beyond his reach. When she arrived at Serannian she and Sorrow were arrested and taken to the Council of Lords to whom she told her story and to whom she revealed the *Qqi d’Evai Mubadieb*. She asked for sanctuary, and it was granted. And this even though she refused to surrender the Basalt Madonna to the men and women of that city on the sea. So, it was there her daughter was born, whom she named Elspeth Isa Snow. There in the shining bustle and safety of Serannian it was that Elspeth grew to be a woman, a strong and fiercely intelligent woman, I should add. Indeed, in the spring of her nineteenth year she was offered a seat on the Council, which she accepted. That same year her mother succumbed to a disease of the blood that had plagued her and her brother since birth, and—”

“Aunty, you didn’t mention that before,” interrupted the tow-headed girl.

“It wasn’t important before. Now it is. Anyway, when Elspeth Snow’s mother died the Basalt Madonna passed into her keeping.”

“And what happened to Sorrow?” the girl asked.

“Oh, he was still there. He was, in fact, ever Elspeth’s dearest friend and confidant. She being one-quarter ghoul herself found his company comforting. But … this is not the end of the tale. There’s more.”

“It *sounds* like the end,” said the boy who’d yawned.

“Very *much* like the end,” said the tow-headed girl..

“Well, if you wish,” said the peddler, “I can stop here. I am tired, and I —”

“No, no, please,” said the boy on the girl’s right. “Tell the rest. If there is more, then you cannot stop here.”

“And why is that?” the peddler asked him.

“My da says that an unfinished tale in an indecent thing.”

Somewhere in the house a door creaked open and was pulled shut just a little too roughly, and all three of the children started at the noise. The cat in

the old woman's lap opened one eye and looked well and profoundly annoyed at having been awakened.

"So," said the peddler, who had not jumped at the slamming door, "your da believes that stories have endings, which means he must also believe they have beginnings. Do you believe that, child?"

The boy looked somewhat baffled at her question.

"Well … do they not?" he asked her.

"I don't think so," she told him. "Then again, I am only a poor peddler who sells oddments and notions and fixes broken wagon wheels and heals warts but … no, *I* do not believe so. Priests and learned scholars may disagree—though I daresay some of them may not. But I would ask you, did our story truly begin when the Snow twins waged their war and conquered Thok and Pnath and all the Lower Dream Lands, or was the beginning when they found the *Qqi d'Evai Mubadieb* in the Waking World, the World Above, where it had been hidden in a cavern known as Khoshilat Maqandeli, deep in the Arabian wastes? But no, more likely we'd have to say the beginning was earlier, the night the twins consummated their incestuous love on an altar they'd fashioned to honor Shub-Niggurath, the All-Mother and consort of the Not-to-Be-Named."

The peddler paused a moment, quietly admonishing herself for having been careless and spoken the name of one of the Great Old Ones, and worse, for having spoken it to three children. She picked up her cold pipe and set the stem between her yellow teeth, chewing at it a moment before continuing.

"Might be," she said, "or might be, instead, the story began when they were born to Alma Shaharrazad Snow, who went by Hera. Or the night she was led by *her* mother into a ghoul warren in an earthly city known as Boston, to be bedded by a ghoul. Or perhaps it all started much farther back, when the Snows and the Tillinghasts and the Cabots—all the members of that clan—entered into a pact with the ghouls whereby they'd be given riches and power in exchange for bearing half-caste children. Or much farther back still, when the Ghūl foolishly went to war against their ancient enemies, the Djinn. Or—"

"I think we get the idea," said the tow-headed girl.

"Good," said the peddler, and she managed a ghost of smile. "Good, for I think that is a very important lesson."

“So … what happened next?” the boy who’d yawned asked. He was now very much awake.

“Well, Elspeth Snow didn’t only grow to be a brilliant woman and a leader of Serannian. She also studied military strategy and became proficient with a sword and a bow and with rifles, too. And she studied the mysteries of the Basalt Madonna as well. She’d learned much of the history of the race of ghouls from Sorrow, who never did come to feel at home in the world of men and longed always to return to Thok. Too much sun. The daughter of Isaac and Isobel Snow loved the old ghoul, and she wished always that he *could* return, and, for that matter, that she might have a chance to see for herself the lands her mother had once ruled, however briefly. She even desired, they say, to look upon the face of her father. She hated him for the strife he’d caused her mother and Sorrow, but some bit of her also wanted to love him as her mother had. In the end, I cannot say what single thing it was led Elspeth to become a soldier, but become a soldier she did. More than a soldier, she became a captain of the Serannian guard, and, by her thirtieth birthday, she’d risen to the highest rank.

“And it was then that she gathered an army from the people of Serannian to march against the despotic *Qqi d’Tashiva* and end his tyranny. Also women and men from Cydathria did she rally to her cause, and from Thran Kled, and the tribes of the Stony Desert and Oonai and even the fearsome shi’earya of the faraway hills of Implan. She took up the weapon her mother and father had used to crush the Old Kingdom of the Ghūl, and on a midsummer’s night she led her army down into Zin and across the Vale of Pnath. There she was joined by another army, rebel ghoul soldiers who followed Richard Pickman, the earthborn ghoul and once-man. Pickman had become an outspoken foe of the King of Bones and Rags and had long since fled Thok to avoid the gallows. The night gaunts and what remained of the race of gugs also followed her when she rode out to meet her father’s army in the abyss below the mountains. The battle was brief, for Elspeth Snow chose to unleash the fires roiling inside the Madonna. When she was done, her field of victory was a scorched plain where stone had been melted to slag, and of the bones of her enemies not even ash remained.”

The tow-headed girl stopped chewing her lower lip long enough to ask, “And what of the King? Did she slay her father?”

“Ah, what of the King. This is where our tale begins to fray, for none seem certain precisely what became of him. Sure, some *do* say that Elspeth

slew her father outright. Others claim that he survived and was taken prisoner and locked in the catacombs deep below the throne room where he'd once ruled. Some would have us believe that he was banished simply and unceremoniously to the World Above to live always among human men and women, stripped of all his power. There is, however, another account of his fate and, I believe, one that more likely is nearer the truth of the matter."

"And what *is* that?" asked the boy who'd yawned, but who was now wide awake and who, the peddler suspected, might not sleep at all that night.

"There is a story I heard the one time I ventured as far as Sinara—I dislike traveling through the Garden Lands, but that one time I did, and, by the way, it is said that soldiers of Sinara were also among those who joined with Elspeth—there is a story I heard there from a very old woman who once had been a priestess in a temple of the Elder Ones. Before that, she'd been a pirate and a smuggler, and before that—well, as I said, she was very old. She'd lived a long and strange life and knew many peculiar tales.

"We sat together in the back of a tavern on the banks of the River Xari, a tavern that served the wharves and all the shady, disreputable sorts one finds dockside, and she told me another version of the fate of Isaac Glyndwr Snow. She said, between fits of coughing and long drinks of whisky—for she was ill and did, I learned, soon after we spoke succumb to her tubercular sickness—that Elspeth took pity on him, for, at the last she saw before her a father. Sure now, children, I grant this is the oddest of all the twists and turns of my story, but often the course of history is many times odder than any fable or fairy tale."

The peddler closed her eyes, taking care here to say only that part fit for the ears of youngsters and, too, only that part she would not in days to come find herself ruing having said. When she opened her eyes, the hearth fire seemed much brighter than it had before, and it ringed the three children like a halo.

"C'mon then," said the boy on the tow-headed girl's right side. "Aunty, what was it the woman in the tavern told you?"

The girl glared at him. "Don't be rude, or she might decide not to say."

"I ought not," said the peddler. Her voice was rubbed thin by the telling of so long a tale, and it sounded to her ears weak and worn thin. "Sure, I should keep it between me, myself, and I. And the cats, of course, for cats know all, or so proclaim the wizened priests and priestesses of Ulthar."

“Please,” said the girl. “We’ll tell no one else. I swear. It will be our secret.”

“It has been my experience,” replied the peddler, “that children are not especially good at keeping secrets.” She laughed quietly and chewed at the stem of her pipe. “But I will tell you all I know, which is, I have no doubt, not as much by half as you three would wish to hear.” The peddler shifted in the chair, and her back popped loudly.

“The sickly woman in Sinara claimed that her own father had stood with Elspeth Snow in the Battle of the Vale of Pnath, and that he had ridden with her after the defeat of the King of Bones and Rags, down winding, perilous canyon roads to witness the sundering of the onyx gates of the royal city of Amaakin’šarr. There he watched as the Twilight’s Wrath—this is the sobriquet Isobel had been given by her troops—confronted her father on the torch-lined steps of the palace. His guards bowed before her, praying she would spare their lives. But the *Qqi d’Tashiva* drew his sword against her and stood his ground. In the decades since his sister’s escape he’d known only loneliness and regret, not one single hour of joy, and what was the loss of his life when he’d already lost the kingdom he’d hoarded at the cost of his only love?”

“‘Father,’ said Isobel Snow to him, ‘will you not now cast aside your folly and old misdeeds? Will you not put down your blade that I will not have to cause you further harm than already I have?’

“The King of Bones and Rags, he sneered hatefully and advanced towards her, blue eyes blazing, his sword glinting in the light of the flickering torches. There was naught remaining in him but bitterness and rage. ‘Do not call *me* father, whore, for you are your mother’s bitch and none of mine. Now, come down off your horse and face me.’

“Elspeth Snow, Twilight’s Wrath, the Maiden of Serannian—for she was called that, as well—did not dismount, as she desperately did not wish to slay the man who’d sired her, no matter his crimes against her mother and against the ghouls and all of the denizens of the Underworld. In her heart, she knew mercy, which Isobel had taught her, having learned it herself from the actions of Pickman and Sorrow. Did they not have fair cause to slay her, rather than aid in her escape? Sure. She had been half the author of their pain and the subjugation of their race. But even the black hearts of ghouls may feel pity.

“‘No, Father,’ said Elspeth. ‘I have brought too much death this day, and your blood will not also stain my hands. I shall not be the despoiler you have become. That will not be your legacy to me.’

‘Thief,’ he growled. ‘Coward and thief, usurper and witch. You come to take my lands from me, but have not the courage to test your mettle against the rightful *Qqi d’Tashiva*. No whelp of mine would flinch from her final duty, cur.’

“At that, one of Elspeth’s lieutenants drew an arrow from his quiver and nocked it, taking aim at Isaac Snow. But she was quick, and she stayed the man’s hand. Again, her father cursed her as a coward.’”

“She should have killed him,” said the boy who’d yawned.

“Of a certain,” agreed the tow-headed girl.

“That may be. In the years to come, said the woman in the tavern in Sinara, Elspeth would sometimes doubt her choice that day, and sometimes she would wish him dead. But the fact, as this woman would have it, is that she did not kill him, nor did she permit any other to bring him harm. She declared that any who dared touch him would suffer a judgment far worse than death.”

“Then what did she do?” asked the boy on the tow-headed girl’s right.

“What she did do, child, was bestow upon him a gift.”

All three children stared back at her now in stark disbelief.

“No,” said the girl.

“Yes,” replied the peddler, “if the woman who had been a priestess in a temple of the Elder Ones, and before that a pirate and a smuggler, if she is to be trusted. Though, of course, it may be she was a liar or mistaken or mad, and sure, you may choose to believe or not.”

“Then … what did she do?” asked the boy who’d yawned. “I mean, what manner of gift did she give such a wicked man?”

At that the peddler smiled and slowly shook her head. “The woman in the tavern did not say, because she did not know. Her father had never told her, not specifically, but said only that it was a gift that lifted from the shoulders of Isaac Snow all his bitterness and insanity, all of his fury and grief. Elspeth’s gift, said the woman in the tavern, restored to him that which he’d held so dear, though *how* this was accomplished we do not know. But he was changed—and changed utterly. Afterwards, Elspeth ordered him escorted to the seven hundred steps and up, up, up … and *up* … to the Gates of Deeper Slumber, where he was sent back to the Waking World to

live out the remainder of his days and where he may yet dwell, for none in the Dream Lands have knowledge of what became of him. We can say only, by *this* version of the truth, that he passed beyond the ken of the world."

"That isn't a very good ending," frowned the tow-headed girl.

"It most assuredly isn't," said the boy who'd yawned.

"Not at all," added the boy on the girl's right side.

The peddler tilted her head, and she said sternly, "Do you imagine this is the way of tales, the way of the world, that it is somehow beholden to come with satisfying conclusions? If, indeed, it comes with any conclusions at all?"

The children didn't answer the question. The boy who'd yawned peered over his shoulder at the fire, which was beginning to burn down. The tow-headed girl stared down at her bare feet. And the boy on her right picked at a loose thread in his trousers. Only the girl spoke. She asked the old woman, "Aunty, did Elspeth Snow become the new Queen of Bones and Rags?"

"No, child, she did not. She had no taste for power, though the temptation must have weighed heavily on her soul. Elspeth entrusted Richard Pickman and his compatriots with the future of Thok and with the task of rebuilding Amaakin'šarr. She forsook what remained of the prophecy, vowing never again to be a soldier, and she rode away from Thok and back to the Upper Dream Lands. She took with her the Basalt Madonna, which, heard, she carried far across the Middle Ocean and even beyond the Eastern Desert and Irem, City of Pillars. It could not be destroyed, and she dared not entrust it to the hands of any being so mighty *they* could have undone the *Qqi d'Evai Mubadieb*. But she did hide it, and she hid it well. Some say she cast it over the edge of the world, though, personally, I think that is likely an exaggeration."

"And what became of her after that?" asked the girl, not looking up from her feet.

"Some say that she returned at last to Serannian, where she died many years ago. And others say she went to Celephaïs, and still others that, by wielding the Madonna she'd become undying and was permitted a place among the Old Ones in the shining city of Kadath. But these are all rumors, and no more to be trusted than ever rumors should be," and with that, the peddler drew a deep breath and said that she'd told all she could tell in a night.

There were questions from the children, but she did not answer them. She sent the three away to their beds, and then went to the garret room she'd been provided for the night—in exchange for a story. Several of the cats followed her, including the tabby tom, and they stood sentry at the top of the stairs. However, despite her great exhaustion, the peddler did not immediately seek sleep. Rather, she opened the shutters of the garret's single small window, and there in Ulthar, she undressed before the brilliant eye of the moon and before all the icy, innumerable stars that speckle an early autumn evening sky. The night regarded her with perfect indifference, and she regarded it with awe. And the peddler, the seller of notions and oddments, the nameless old woman who wandered the cities on the plains below Mount Lerion, she recalled her mother, and a kindly ghoul named Sorrow, and the last face her father had worn. And she told herself a truer tale than she'd told the children.

INTEGRITY

Jonathan Thomas

I'm holed up in this alley, my gun's out of bullets, I have no cover except some trash barrels, and the demons are gathering at the alley's mouth. It's around 3:00 AM. I haven't a care in the world. I didn't plan to end it here and now, but I knew it would have to end like this. Pinball suicide, pure and simple. Once you put yourself in play, you have to roll down the hole eventually.

I almost feel good about the alley. The alley's a kind of corridor, and a corridor's an apt symbol of life. The opening at one end is birth, and at the other, death. Birth leads from somewhere, and death to somewhere. But this alley has a wall at my end, a good metaphoric touch, considering what the demons intend doing to me. They're cackling, making the trash barrels resonate, but not showing themselves yet. Killing me will be efficient. They're sworn to that. First they'll produce noises to make me sweat, but so what? Probably there's time to see my life replayed, the real life that brought me to this.

Like it or not, real life will kill you: my paraphrase of the ancient choice between a short, glorious life and a long, quiet one. I'm imagining an audience to help order my thoughts, and that's the moral I want to impart. Even if I had a flesh-and-blood audience, it would have to be less real than me, because if it can sit back and be an audience, it hasn't lived as much as I have, hasn't lived at all yet, really. You couldn't understand unless you were here too, and then you couldn't be an audience at all.

Real life only walked in on me when I finally realized it was in charge of me, and not vice versa. In other words, I was so bogged down trying to run my life that I became its captive audience.

I was playing at private detective out of downtown Providence, Rhode Island, a good facsimile of a rundown set from a *Thin Man* film, and maybe that's what had roped me in. Nothing else recommended my particular dump, a one-room office over the fleapit Strand Theatre, where the windows hadn't been washed for a good twenty years, plus the two years I couldn't afford to either. Not that Washington Street profited from a clearer view, looking more natural through dingy glass.

As for sensory input, I was treated to plenty by the porn soundtracks downstairs. At first I was amused, then annoyed, and finally it was no different from a constant background of Top 40. On that crucial afternoon, the culture downstairs was loud enough to rattle the windows, and I was investing attention in it to put off a decision. Twilight had already dimmed the office, and I could either up the electricity bill or go home to soybean casserole for the fifth straight night.

I was about to opt for bean destiny when she knocked and entered, as the door requested. I turned on my anglepoise lamp. Her hair caught the light, and hence my eye. Such hair was incredible, too good not to be true. Absolutely black, almost long enough for Godiva purposes, and with an air of life to it, as if you could caress it and it would caress you back and then some. Her face and features were thin and sharp, in a semi-exotic Eastern Mediterranean way, but her skin was white as lily-of-the-valley.

Her clothes were enviably snug on her, Frye boots, a navy-blue knee-length dress, and a skintight blue item that obviously wasn't a leotard because of the silver filigree neckwork that almost reached her breasts. Her moss-green velvet jacket was very tailored, and didn't obscure the impression of a girl who was slim in the best slinky manner. My business forces you to assume whatever image will put the customer at ease about plunking down cash. Sometimes people need a Bogart or William Powell, but in this case, I was the one in need, at a loss over who to be.

"Arthur Kent?" Her voice projected both a childlike lilt and a grownup command. I nodded.

"I'm Selina Singer." I nodded again. She held out her hand, so warm and pliant it seemed willing to lie within mine indefinitely unless I let go, which I reluctantly did.

"My employers believe you may be of long-term service to us. I understand you've been here since completing an independent degree project in criminology two years ago?"

I nodded more cautiously, then remembered myself and indicated Miss Singer should take the seat before my desk. She smiled graciously.

"You also aided Providence police investigations part-time during winters and full-time between semesters." Once seated, she became so soft-spoken that the skinflick soundtrack threatened to drown her out. I curbed an impulse to stamp on the floor as if to quiet noisy neighbors. I tried to shift closer without coming off as hard of hearing.

“For the most part, Miss Singer, my police work involved documents, tracking them down or reading them well. Minimal risk of neck.”

“But so far your clients have been satisfied with the results. Mr. LaPlante, Mrs. Schiller, Mr. Faig—”

“You probably also know I’ve had few other clients, satisfied or otherwise.” To bolster a Bogart image, I fished a Kool from my top drawer, letting the cigarette hang casually, seldom inhaling. “Luckily for me, perseverance has been a good warmup act for competence.”

Putting a fist to her lips, Selina coughed. “Could you put that out, please? My throat is rather sensitive.” I ground the lit end in a tin ashtray and watched a paltry wisp escape.

“Cigarettes. I hate ’em, myself.” Her puzzled look was fleeting. “You know, Miss Singer, you’re the one paying me to dig. Why should you want me, since your investigators seem well-versed in the trade?”

“First off, we’ll pay you to stop being a detective.” Her smile was catty but no less enchanting. “That’s not what we want you for, exactly.” I arched my brows to imply she should continue.

“I represent Esoteric Research. We’re tentatively nationwide, just setting up Rhode Island offices now. Ours is a scholarly pursuit of local arcane traditions, legends, phenomena, and practices. We try to trace their histories and factual bases, with special attention to surviving and resurgent spiritualism and witchcraft.” As I took all this in, my grin cracked a tad wider to accommodate it. “A number of foundations have taken us seriously enough to allow us a certain liberality and freedom of movement. What are your usual fees?”

I sobered up. “A thousand-dollar retainer, and a hundred dollars a day.”

She nodded as with confirmed assumptions. “Would you settle for a sure seven hundred a week?”

I tried to keep some caprice in my eyes as they widened. “Who, precisely, is endowing you, if they don’t mind being disclosed?”

She reeled off some Waspy names ending in dales or fields or thorps, none of which rang even remotely like aluminum. I let her lungs empty out, and when she drew breath, I cut in. “All very well, Miss Singer, but my lease here runs another four months.” The matinee downstairs was over, letting me tilt my chair back and make cathedral hands.

Her eyes followed me back into the shadows. “You’ll be earning enough for this office to be a minor loss, but the organization may agree to absorb that cost for such a brief period.” She said this more haltingly, as if it weren’t

in a brochure. I looked appreciative, and she relapsed into officialese. “I can’t overemphasize your value to us, Arthur. You’re familiar with the region. You minored in anthropology. You’re ideal for both archival and field research, where many of our informants class themselves as criminal types and won’t be easy to find. You’d have every chance for advancement in a young, growing company, and maybe for this one and only time you’d be able to pool all your resources. Are you interested?’

I wondered how a sphinx would smile and attempted an imitation as I leaned forward. The work appealed, the pay compelled, but two years of financial thin ice made me skeptical of instant security. I assured her I was interested, saying no more till she made one spot-on gesture to prove she was on the level. Brushing black strands off her cheek, she asked what I was doing for dinner. I told her, and she asked if I wouldn’t mind dining at her place. That was clincher enough for me to take the job.

There was no sense humoring my office hours to the bitter end. I applied vindictive flair to “CLOSED FOREVER” on white notepaper and taped it to the door’s frosted pane, then pointed at my lamp by way of polite request. Miss Singer obliged, drenched us in twilight, and slipped by as I locked up. I pictured the two years sealed up behind me as something alive, Fortunato without even benefit of sherry. My smile was pure and warm with spite as I ambled away.

On the street, Selina took my arm like a textbook lady, but with too much hold for mere formality. She answered my curious look with a fetching show of teeth, and I realized that she, inscrutably, was attracted to me. No complaints. In the dusk everything was dreamlike, still dingy but wistful within the gray, and my steps had that heavy, wading sensation common in dreams. But I felt more alive than I had in months, more a part of the world despite the moment’s storybook simplicity.

I maintained the strong silent act until we climbed the granite steps of her Benefit Street mansion, an unattainable fantasy palace for someone like me who could hardly foot tenement rent in a punk section like Smith Hill. The outside was square, yellow, and Georgian, with the fancy trim in black. Inside, drastic modernizing had transformed each floor into an apartment of the sort beloved by the Mercedes set. Selina had the second floor, where everything had been upholstered and carpeted and cushioned until a hard edge or sharp corner would have been shocking as the exposed bone of a compound fracture. She asked me to make myself comfortable while she got dinner underway.

When she returned, we chatted away the simmering time. We trundled out our shards of mutual taste, background, and attitude, tawdry things in the long run that fool people into thinking they're compatible, the modern mating ritual everyone dignifies as "getting acquainted."

The meal itself was something Southern European. I couldn't describe it more specifically except as red and green. As with most great meals, my serving looked skimpy, but I could scarcely finish it. Selina seemed proud of making me full.

In one trip, Selina cleared the table but didn't return, neither acknowledging my offer to wash dishes nor running the faucet herself. Too glutted to move for a while, I contemplated my knees through the glass tabletop, until something dropped softly into my line of sight. Selina sat down and placed rolling papers next to the ounce bag, and I, out of practice, fumbled through what used to be called a bomber.

My first greedy draw sent me lunging for the tumbler of water she'd wisely set out, and all the same I had to stifle a coughing binge. Customarily, long exposure to mediocre dope casts doubt on the purity of anything stronger. Repressing the gauche question didn't purge the impulse to ask something. "Didn't you say your throat was too sensitive?"

"Only to tobacco smoke." She drew so deeply I winced, and held it with a feline contentment, and exhaled luxuriously. The cattiness abided in her smile. "Isn't that funny?'

I laughed, but not at that. The south wall's Palladian window was nearly dammed up with hanging plants on different lengths of wire. But half the plants were egregiously dead, and still up there as if nothing were wrong. That, to me, was funny, and I said so.

"What do you mean?" Selina looked bewildered. "They have as much right to be there as the rest of them."

"No," I insisted and took her hand as if for paternal effect. "They're not there, they're dead, don't you see? There's nothing left that can be deprived of its rights."

She looked at my hand, then at me, and at last she'd loosened up enough to let edginess show. We stood up and stepped into each other's arms as if we'd rehearsed. We kissed without hesitation or haste, lingered, and broke off. The rest was equally smooth.

I awoke contented for the first time in ages, though we'd slept little. The world looked fine, even if a little unfocused. That's how I reported to my

new job. The euphoria persisted till I mentioned the scruffiness of the institute's neighborhood.

"We're not at all sensationalistic," she announced, the career woman again. We stood before the Blackstone Building, four stories of brick with Italianate cornice and lintel in white. Despite the Victorian ostentation, "Blackstone" itself was chiseled in simple block letters across the middle of the second story. The ground floor was mostly display window, long vacant. Our entrance was a modern glass door, surmounted by Art Nouveau stained glass, in the rubbishy alley off to one windowless side.

This was at the hind end, as it's usually conceived, of Westminster Mall, which runs like a spinal cord through downtown. Clustered around the head end are banks, public utilities, City Hall, while down here languish greasy spoons, moribund shops, and outright dives. And also, avoiding "sensationalism," Esoteric Research.

Then and for the next few weeks, my employers declined to supplement the vague impression of the place Selina had fed me. Professional types led me through catacombs of little white cubicles occupied by indistinct, leisure-suited bureaucrats and secretaries about as receptive to eye contact as hamsters. I had no idea how many partitions or people had been stuffed into the building, or how they'd been regimented into floorplans. Gradually I realized I was being diverted from whole acres within the Blackstone Building's shell.

Suspicions of the company's real business first glimmered during my personnel interview, when the pruny man with the scrawny neck and wheezy monotone kept twisting the standard questions. Instead of requesting references, he reeled off a few dozen names and gurgled happily when I couldn't place them. He ignored my academic and vocational backgrounds and asked about religious and supernatural experiences, and knowledge of myth and occultism. On a one-to-ten scale he had me rate the plausibility of aliens, ghosts and their ilk, and before the interview itself became more implausible, he handed me an ID and numbers to call if I were injured on the job. By way of cordial dismissal, he looked up and let a few teeth show.

My first field assignments seemed trivial, a waste of their money and my talents, and no "integration of all my resources," as Selina had promised. A typical case had me traverse an entire three blocks to Dick's Bookshop with orders to buy all his occult stock. I received an envelope full of tens, and was advised to take a company car.

During my college days I was a regular at Dick's, located in the heart of the soot zone amidst hat stores, bars, and a produce mart that had gotten away for years with the name "Majestic Fruits." Titles moldered untouched for eons on Dick's ceiling-high shelves, and the dust was thick enough for the silverfish to build bungalows. It was a timeless, archetypal bookshop. Dick had been there since 1930.

I could never tell if he recognized me. He always gave me the same squint, nod, and hello. A couple of his senior cronies shuffled aside as I approached the counter, inspecting me from coyly shifted faces. Dick was still intent on his pipe and a radio talk show. His mouth went grim, and he removed the pipe and poked it at me. "What do you think's wrong with state lotteries?"

I thought about it a second, but didn't have to.

"Well, I'll tell ya." For the several minutes he went on, the bystanders stayed out of it and I agreed politely. When he relit the pipe and started puffing as if to restoke himself, I asked if he had anything on the occult.

"Whats'at? Oh, yeah. Aah, that's a lot of bunk if y'ask me." His eyes welled up through lenses thick as false bottoms in shot glasses. "How old d'you think I am?"

I hazarded eighty-three. "I'll be eighty-five in two months. And d'ya think I'm scared to die?" He made a sour face. "Nah. Because, I'll tell ya. When you're dead, you're gone. Nothing. So what's there to be scared of? Ghosts, the beyond, that's all superstitious crap. Not one shred of evidence. Why, I found three boxes of that stuff in the backroom this morning. This woman came in here, must've been four years ago. Had a store on Washington Street, sold all kinds of hoodoo merchandise and books. Had to close down. Not enough interest."

He gloated some at this juncture. "She came in and sold all the books to me. Then I had that fire some kids broke in and set one night." The fire had been an old dependable topic when I'd last seen him two years ago. He ambled into the back and knocked things around. He was gone a subjectively long time, and I wondered what he was doing. His cronies were studying paperback titles and flipping old *Boys' Life* pages.

Dick returned lugging a melon crate full of hardcovers. He wasn't a big man. The load should have dislocated his shoulders, but he wasn't even breathing hard. He heaved the crate onto the countertop. "There's two more like that."

"I'll take them all. How much?"

He gaped incredulously from under his green visor, and scurried away for the other two. He set a price that sounded fair, so instead of haggling I consulted my envelope. It contained just that amount. He counted it out, gave it a just-so look, and rang it up. I gave the first crate an experimental tug, and fought an urge to ask for Dick's assistance.

I never knew what came of this purchase, or any of my findings. Further items and reports went to Selina, whom I trusted more than an angel. An obvious lesson arises here that you, my imaginary audience, will certainly squander. If your ideal of love and beauty ever solidifies before you, and you want no one else and no one else has ever loved you so much, with no end in sight, then trust that person less than anyone else you've ever met, than even the sleaziest glowering drunk at the bus station. Like most truths I've discovered, it's too obvious and demands too much self-reliance to be believed.

Fool's gold though she was, Selina, salary aside, was the job's only reward those first weeks. We spent most of our free hours at her place "relaxing," with music, TV, reading, and little else to busy us. You can spend ages that way with someone you love and feel not a moment was wasted, and though you wonder where so much time evaporated, it's no big deal.

Hoarded privacy was the premium of our foregoing friendlessness, she too new in town, I too long there to retain any transient college pals. Some inconvenient phone calls and dead-of-night visits set me to pondering how high she actually ranked, since her input was in round-the-clock demand. Faking sleep whenever she answered the bedside phone, I overheard loud, guttural customers with kindergarten grammar and troglodyte accents. Demure Selina adopted a tone that should have left frost on the receiver, doling out decisions, always getting the last word. I wondered about these fellow employees and their exact duties, but only until Selina was beside me again, her arm coiled around me and her breath upon my neck.

After the sixth or seventh 2 AM doorbell, I indulged my curiosity as far as the Palladian window over the front door. Through the screen of hanging plants I listened to the typical queen-and-caveman exchange. The portico hid our caller till the front door closed, and then down the flagstone walk loped a dark form that would have confounded me no less at a more reasonable hour. On the man's back was a knee-length black trenchcoat, and on his head a wide-brimmed Stetson, during the first week of August when I was too warm standing in the draft naked.

He turned toward the door, and I went midwinter cold. Streetlight sufficed to show the face was grey, an inhuman hue as of city snow after a week of pollution. He was leering. Selina's footsteps diverted me from the window, but before she'd reached the upstairs landing, I couldn't resist another glimpse of the stranger. He was gone, when he shouldn't even have cleared the gate yet.

Selina entered, saw me across the dark living room, and stopped. Her face, I now realize, was choosing a mask, and settled on tenderness. She approached, took my hands, and fondled them. "I'm sorry that woke you, Arthur. An emergency consultation. I don't encourage them."

Either the hour per se or the residual clout in her tone militated against humor on my part. She went to the window, checked up and down the street, and stamped petulantly. "I told them not to do that out in the open!" At my questioning expression she smoothed her pout and said, "That was one of our specialists. You'll be introduced in due course." For no excusable reason, that satisfied me.

If not for Selina, I'd have evacuated the organization by then. They, using her voice, claimed I'd be in on the ground floor, on the principle that the most blatant lie is somehow the last to be challenged. True pits are bottomless, and the Blackstone sheltered a Mohole for snakes, with a wafer-thin ground floor that broke as soon as I breathed.

The plunge was rigged so that both the institute and I would pretend nothing unusual had happened. That morning ceased to be like any other when we bypassed the receptionist who ordinarily relayed orders that took us our separate ways. Instead, Selina escorted me to a little white office with nothing to distinguish it, except for the man sizing me up from his desk as if I were his sole reason for being there. I felt like a wayward schoolboy.

Once the man was up and shaking hands, I could see he was teetering on antiquity, burdened by liver spots, slack jowls, and dunlap paunch. But when his blackish eyes blinked, I pictured vises snapping shut. He said I might like meeting a fellow employee from another branch of operations.

He leaned on the intercom button and coldly intoned a manifestly Japanese name. Its bearer immediately sauntered though the rear door, and I automatically offered a handshake, which seemed to confuse the newcomer, but didn't prevent him from reciprocating, to my instant regret. The flesh was grey and yielded unpleasantly like sponge under thin rubber. Vice-eyes repeated the name, and its owner shuffled back.

The owner's looks were too distracting for me to retain that name. He could have been the same night caller I'd spied, or any member of his species; I could never tell them apart. Nothing in the facial features struck me as Asian.

The mouth preoccupied me. Ever since my moonlit glimpse I couldn't shake a feeling that the archetypal brutish gunsel had busted out of the Platonic realm, and the mouth foremost hinted why. Too wide in a sharklike fashion, it was stiff with a sneer both vicious and stupid. The teeth were bright and impossibly even, like a double row of blunted incisors. Rather than speak, the grey man was content to flash them at me and stare, and I conjectured whether each grey man's thirty-two points had been filed down to forestall panic among the stenographers.

For relief, I looked to Selina, which cued old Vice-eyes. "He and his fellow Oni were recruited by our agents in Japan. The central office directs them to this branch, in whatever number we specify." Whatever number? I grimaced at the vision of Oni by the hundreds dropping off factory conveyor belts into huge baskets.

The eyes were glassy like two-way mirrors, and though nobody could look in, something was gazing out that wanted the spectator to squirm. The hair was black, combed back and slicked down. His black suit was loose and may have seemed less shabby some thirty years ago. An Imp of the Perverse made me ask, "So how do you get these Oni?"

"We conjure them up." The blackish eyes were devoid of mirth or irony. "We do not idly boast in asserting a serious, pragmatic approach to the occult. We find what myths and lore are based on fact, and we reopen ancient routes into the Invisible World to get at them. Then we literally employ those facts to strengthen the organization."

He waved at the Oni as if at a badly stuffed trophy. "We have uncovered his kindred spirits all over the world." He finally smiled, so we'd all know he was exercising his wit. It was a ghastly smile, and fortunately he couldn't keep it up. "Like most demons, the Oni prove little trouble to control and feed. They are completely subservient to us."

But I wasn't among that select "us" yet, and the demon was making the best of that. The mockery in the ashen face warned me only Selina and the fat man prevented him from tearing into me. I was uneasy all right, but smiled weakly and asked if the Oni ate raw meat. The fat man said no in a way that didn't comfort me.

The sub rosa message shone like magnesium strips between the elderly eyelids. My employers had lied outright to ensure my working for them, and after they judged me worthy of the truth, they'd dose me bit by bit. What they'd chosen to reveal implied how big and powerful they were, to scare me for my own good because they liked me, and because they needed loyal employees. Maybe I could go far with them, but I absolutely shouldn't try to test how powerful they were by irritating them. If I could locate my image in the fat man's eye, would it crack like a walnut whenever he blinked? I avoided eye contact.

Selina, though professionally cool, didn't participate in this workplace intimidation. She didn't have to, and besides, she did love me. Vice-eyes did not, and wanted to underscore his point. "Despite patent shortcomings in charm and intellect, the Oni possess invaluable talents." He surveyed the demon as impassively as a flea-circus ringmaster surveys his performers, and commanded, "Demonstrate."

The grey man continued staring at me, occasionally flicking his eyes toward the ringmaster. Demon skin began to change, in the way an overripe peach gets soft and untouchable, only quickly, and with a methane stench that made me nauseous. Selina and Vice-eyes must have been used to it. The putrescent flesh was running in greasy streamlets, melting right off the bones. Patches of white shone briefly on forehead, cheeks, and knuckles. The flesh paused at arbitrary ebb and then flowed into new arrangement, like a rising tide alive with sea worms.

The desk was close enough to lean on without being too conspicuous. I was afraid, not of the disgusting Oni, but of being sick in that clean white office. Even Selina's solicitous touch on my arm made me shudder reflexively, as if my body, at least, knew better than to trust anyone there. Vice-eyes' imperious smile was bereft of humor, and the Oni's lips were rolling back over skeletal grin to resume their sneer, red rather than grey.

As the skin reshaped it lightened, while movement at the waist showed off the baggy black suit's utility. The belly was bloating as if with stagnant gases, tightening the suit, and as the stench worsened, I leaned more feebly on the desk, weathering a new undertow of vertigo. The process, especially then, was the purest obscenity I'd ever seen.

When I looked to the face again, it, and demonic physique, had stabilized as another Vice-eyes, marred only by the crumby suit and the wrought-iron stupid grin. Selina and the fat man talked business a few minutes, letting me contemplate a protean lackey's possibilities. The lackey stared back with a

contempt too profound to take personally. Selina and her colleague ran out of conversation, and he glanced up and dismissed his grinning shadow. The departure was like a shark fin dipping underwater. The door never opened. I felt helpless, immobile, even after Selina tapped my shoulder and said, “He’s gone, and we should leave too.”

Without another word, Vice-eyes sat down and studied his bare desktop. Selina led me out, and I followed complacently till the sight of a men’s room door betrayed my suggestibility. I lurched in, and five minutes later Selina was waiting with whatever sympathy I needed.

In forthcoming weeks I joined with Selina in real work at last. We identified some Satanists in Woonsocket who’d been desecrating churches and who are still, as far as I know, blithely evading Woonsocket’s Finest. In the second-growth wilderness of western Rhode Island we and our grotesque instruments staged an overnight vigil of a reputedly haunted graveyard, and though we arguably saw and heard things, we never found out for sure. The results, and the Satanist data, and everything else were consigned to another department. I was too infatuated with Selina, and too wary of my employers, to fuss about access to findings.

The days of fixed innocence had to end despite every machination to prolong them. The organization’s intricate bulk had too many holes to plug, and the innate corruption had to leak out. I could smell it walled up and waiting, but I, happy with Selina, was the last person who cared to deal with it.

In any setup so vast, oversights only hurt the hired help. The chance discoveries that put me in this alley were supposed to be disclosed gradually, so as not to overtax my tolerance, till I became utterly callous. And now chance may afford me my salvation, when the Oni try doing to me what I saw them do when chance first kicked in.

I was retrieving dossiers for Selina when the cruel, childish laughter of Oni lured me to an open door. Three among the dozen or so inside scowled at and then ignored me, which I interpreted as carte blanche to snoop. Most of them were hunched forward on built-in benches along two opposite walls, engrossed in four demons cross-legged on the floor and playing chicken with a switchblade.

One would shake a fist at his circle of peers, holding the hilt so that the blade seemed to bloom from the fist itself. His leer would erupt into chortling as he menaced the other three, and suddenly the knife flipped at

one of them, who had to disappear or be skewered. The point stuck into the floor, and the players grabbed for the privilege of next toss.

The danger only made for fascination and fiendish glee, and as the game grew feverish, they had to up the risk. Spectators slapped players' heads and kicked their backsides, and the players pinched and poked each other. One demon's head was twisted around roughly, and he had an extra distraction seeing me for the first time. He gawked a second too long, and the handle was quivering in the side of his neck. Surprise expanded into shock before he fell back, arms straight up, hands clutching at air that evaded his lungs.

The rest cackled louder and then went silent. Their eyes were glossy with an unmistakable feral appetite, and they closed in, to pound and kick at the dying body. They withdrew, one of them still kicking at a twitchy arm, the others sniffing the air.

Eagerly they snatched at something unseen overhead, snagged, yanked, ripped, and crammed it into their gaping mouths. They flailed again while still chewing like dogs, and when swallowing, their neck tendons bulged as if something wouldn't go down easily. Their arms reached lower every time, as if something fluttered more weakly after pieces were gouged from it. I couldn't hear their prey suffer, but something at an unprobed depth within me shriveled in response, making my stomach tremble as if it would crack into ulcers. Dizzy and enervated, I staggered off to Selina's cubicle.

She recognized the turmoil in my face, maybe from her own past, and made consoling noises. She sat me down and hurried out, and came back uncapping a quart of bourbon. I guzzled two shots from a Dixie cup and marveled at how incongruous liquor looked and tasted in these white rooms. Knives and demon gunsels weren't nearly as out of place.

She told me to show her what had upset me. The Oni were slouching at their benches or slumped against the wall, with sated, blissful mien. One noticed us, belched, and spaced out again. They were totally unconcerned with the grey cadaver stiff in contortion; it might have been a depleted antipasto platter. Selina said, "In mortal form, they can be mortally injured. Like humans, they have souls. The Oni eat souls." The scene seemed to make her more irate than horrified. "Now we'll have to conjure up another one." She turned and started away, expecting me to follow.

The organization had been careless, failing to segregate their ravenous henchmen effectively, and they extended amends agreeable to me and simple enough for them. Shamelessly I let them buy me off, despite the traumatic memory of what I felt inside me that day. That afternoon, Selina waved a

pair of plane tickets at me. We had a week in Montreal, all expenses paid, commencing immediately. For the duration I could neither block out nor fully accept that my employers had to be fundamentally evil, just to supply the Oni's diet. And Selina was with them all the way.

Montreal was all the more Edenic with tragedy lowering like thunderheads on the skyline. Halfway through the week I had one perfect day, a culmination of the last few months' dream life with Selina. Like a Renaissance cathedral, every plan, incident, and upshot cooperated to create a natural, harmonious gestalt, vivid to me yet. Selina had sensed the same, and we went to bed wistful that the enchantment, though lingering with us, would slip away in the night. The next days might be good, but we'd lost something unique. Back in Providence, I had only the fading illusion of those good days. I can't recall one measly image of Montreal now.

The first deceptive circumstance was of a fond reunion. I was finishing a lunch at Koerner's, another venerable glint in the soot zone, a bunker-like structure jammed like an afterthought between five-story neighbors. The frontage on either side of the entrance was mostly picture window, clogged with wire-hung placards of daily specials. Twin sets of day-glow green swinging doors opened onto separate breezeways, and inside were four rows of white enamel tables on black legs. The legs stood on alternating black and red linoleum with white inset squares, and the counter and walls up to tabletop height were azure. From there to the white tin ceiling, the walls were robin's egg blue.

The countertop radio's all-news station with its unchanging diction seemed to waylay time. The customer base and prices also hadn't changed since 1947, enticements in ascending order. As a student I'd often brought less snotty pals and instructors here, and now I was alone, viewing the codgers with frayed but adamant faces, dress sense, and voices. This was my sanctuary from undergrads, businessmen, and the 1970s.

When my long-lost college mentor trailed in on that thought, I dropped my spoon as if it had sprouted a joy buzzer. He reached the counter without seeing me, and looked as genuine and shopworn as anyone else in line. He was a big man who walked with a slight, humble stoop, though his eyes were bright and indomitable. While he ordered, I stared at him on the premise he'd eventually feel it like a homing signal. He paid, squinted around the room in chagrin, spotted me, and smiled.

No sooner was he seated with me than I pestered him for details of his last two years' adventures. Dr. Feder had a knack for storytelling and dining

simultaneously, faster than I could do either. Tenure had eluded him for political reasons, and he resigned the same year I'd graduated. Glad to be shut of the game, he dipped into miscellaneous blue-collar gigs while developing quasi-mystical ideas on the ways environment shaped and arrested thought. Observation of small-town residents across the Northeast supported his hypotheses, and finally he'd lucked into an organization where his work had been anticipated, and where it could benefit the public.

He characterized his employers as wealthy but discreet unto anonymity, incorporated simply as Educational Research. I nearly choked on a mouthful of coffee, gulped it with a napkin to my lips. Perhaps he'd meant Esoteric Research?

He chuckled, but his eyes narrowed as he admitted I'd hit on a truer name at that. I asked for more details about his work.

"Well, consider the number of isolated communities even in so small and congested a place as Rhode Island. Dozens of them, between urban enclaves and backwater hamlets. Take into account the state's total population of circa 900,000. Statistically, a lot of good minds must be wasting away in isolation. Far too many become sticks in the mud after high school, maybe selling insurance or shelving library books, but never suspecting, let alone realizing, their potential in the wider world.

"And before they settle down, or stagnate rather, these thinkers show striking originality, without a mainstream to conform to intellectually. My employers have the manpower and funding to locate brilliant children in elementary and middle schools and finance their private, nonrestrictive education. The children I've found were headstrong, unique and creative, in reaction to stultifying environments, before they could 'grow up' and give in to them."

"What happened to the kids who enrolled in this program?"

Feder scratched a wispy sideburn. "I don't know. Other people act on my findings." Feder studied my face and rummaged vest pockets for his pipe and pouch. On the third try I lit a match for him. His eyes roved the lines on his big red hands. "You've reminded me of some sad news I happened upon in today's obituaries. A very likable boy I recommended for aid died yesterday in an auto crash." He waved impatiently at my sorries and asked about my work.

I deleted Selina and the Oni. Feder was good at concealing worry within his bulk, but some escaped through gleaming eyes and an itch under thinning

salt-and-pepper hair. After I swore my bosses really were called Esoteric Research, he got up for another cup of tea.

We traded more data. He punched in on Washington Street, I on Westminster. He'd been working three weeks, I'd put in two months. I described all the personnel who'd made a distinct impression, and some sounded awfully familiar to him. Educational Research had also baited him with talk of a Rhode Island ground floor in a nationwide venture.

I was especially curious about his recruitment. "Coincidence," he said, a one-word hedge for the misgivings that hovered around us. His graveyard factory shift in Albion was becoming onerous. One midnight he found the evening paper at his workstation, open to the classifieds, an overhead bulb shining directly on Educational Research's five-line come-on. Next day, they hired him. He remained somber, presumably over the boy's death, and I was glad he hadn't crossed paths with the Oni. As for my recruitment, Feder heard an abridged version wherein the cordiality, and nothing more, of a company rep visiting my previous employment had won me over.

We were both still uneasy, but could do nothing for it. Feder yanked out a pocket watch and went hmph. "Any minute now, someone should be waltzing in here with my new assignment."

"And we'd both feel better if our mysterious bosses didn't see us together." We shook hands.

"At least not till one of us figures something out, or proves there's nothing to figure."

As I rose, he scribbled on a paper napkin. "My address and phone number. Can you drop by, say, Thursday evening?"

I nodded, took the napkin, and shrugged on my jacket. Feder mock-saluted and pondered his teacup as if it held loose, prophetic leaves.

After the first swinging door I paused, hearing someone bustle through the other side. Had Feder's lunch date arrived? I peeked through my door's porthole. Gentlemanly Feder stood to greet a woman whose movements were so clipped as to seem like propaganda for muscular economy. Any grace or beauty was encased in efficiency. Something about her puzzled me till I caught her in brief profile. It was Selina.

I couldn't have backed off faster if she'd shot at me. I staggered back to the Blackstone, in a daze, unable to think. At 5:00 PM I was worse, and told Selina I was coming down with something. She believed me, and during the week I improved at faking insouciance. I preferred not to confront her. She was still the love of my life till I informed her of what I'd learned too soon.

Two years playing at shamus had taught me ugly facts seldom bowed out gracefully, but I still loved Selina more than truth at whatever cost. Feder was more skilled a digger than I, and lacked my compunctions. Thursday night I went to him like a charlatan courting blind justice.

Feder had cloistered himself on Weybosset Street, around the corner from Dick's, two flights above a billiards hall. He was among the few people I'd met who could be disliked purely because of their ideas, which made some colleagues jealous, and threatened the cozy little paradigms of others. Intellectually, Feder was always on the defensive.

He first entered my mind as a physical target as well when knocking on his half-open door produced no response. I poked it hard, stepped to one side, and waited. I peered in. The room was dark, and bright rectangles outlined drawn shades. I groped out the wall switch, blinked away the glare, and winced. The Spartan furnishings had been wrecked, even the stove door wrenched off, and the radiator upended.

The backroom's door was stuck, but gave too quickly when I shouldered it, as if someone had withdrawn. Off-balance I crashed into a desk and apparently bruised my hand on a sharp corner. This room was also dim, but by the light through the door I discerned bloody tooth marks, instead of black-and-blue, below my thumb. I cussed and glanced around, but the demons must have vanished at my entrance. Odd outlines where furniture should have been suggested a continuation of rampage here.

There was no overhead light, and I wasn't anxious to see too much too soon. En route to pull the shades I slipped and cursed again, stumbling against the wall. A feeble voice called my name the instant before the shade snapped up. My slide across the floor had been recorded in blood streaks that had spread from a broad pool beneath Dr. Feder. His bulging eyes were on me, and his hands wavered helplessly over his broad chest. The shirt was soaked and shredded, and I drew blood biting my lip at the thought of what was under the fabric. I couldn't speak for a minute. To make matters worse, Feder spoke first. "You're a tad late."

To me it was already a voice from beyond the grave. "Who killed you? What happened?"

"Lights went out, and they were just there." He turned his head and retched blood. "In bad light they looked grey."

I started shaking. It wouldn't have helped, but I regretted telling him nothing about the Oni.

“Played games with me. Knew where it was, but pretended to search so they could destroy the place.” His arms sank to his chest, then rose back in revulsion at the mess there. “When they found it, one with knife to me pointed at one who made begging motions on knees. One with knife made mock stabs while other laughed. Then he just tore into me. They were waiting for me to die. They looked…” Horror managed to glaze over the pain in his eyes. “They looked hungry.”

“Then I came in. What did they take?”

He didn’t go on. I left without touching anything.

Both our organizations were limbs of the same inconceivable behemoth, but that was the most someone at my rank could nail down in a lifetime. Their ultimate policy was so well-shielded, they could keep their enemies on the payroll till they’d served their purpose and then lower the boom. Feder had understood his situation, and been liquidated all the sooner for letting on he understood. I was probably safe. Even if the assassins had recognized me, they likely hadn’t said anything, out of contempt for their masters.

Within twenty-four hours, Feder was avenged and I was a dead man too. I’d continued spending a few nights per week on Smith Street, and better there than Selina’s for a bout of insomnia. I didn’t see her till five the next day, determined to know her actual work, and how evil she was when we weren’t together. After supper I used her dope so I could simulate detachment, but it made me distant and curt until Selina excused herself for some sort of courier rendezvous. To no avail I rifled her desk and bureaus for solid information. In all documents, knowledge of the organization was assumed, and I could connect nothing on paper with the Selina I loved. In minutes she’d become a stranger.

I had the jitters, paced the room without losing them, and sequestered myself in the spare room I’d converted to a study. My revolver from Washington Street, including ammo, was earning its keep as a paperweight. I saw it for the first time in months. I wanted it to panic Selina into talking. I heard her call my name, and through my unlit doorway saw her listen, then stash a long envelope in her living room davenport. She doused the lights, and shut the bedroom door behind her.

Absent-mindedly holding onto the gun, I turned her desk lamp back on, extracted the envelope, and undid its flap. I dumped out some two dozen obits and headlines, each concerning a small-town quiz-kid and untimely demise. A yellow lined sheet contained two lists of names under the headings “Deceased” and “Extant,” though several of the latter were crossed

out. A sheet of typewriter stock with Feder's return address in the upper right bore several false starts at an apparent warning letter to parents. For the first time, Feder seemed small and pathetic.

I hollered Selina's name and barreled into the bedroom. She was just exiting the en suite bathroom, dabbing makeup off her eyelids with a facecloth. She asked, "Did you call me?"

I shook the papers at her like a mute ghost, furious, with chains. She wasn't remotely rattled. "Why, what's wrong?"

"You had him killed!" I snarled and flung down the papers.

Without them, the gun in my other hand was much more conspicuous to both of us. Selina stammered a little. "You mean the man who compiled that material? Well yes, of course, he was an enemy of the institute. If you read any of those pages, you know that."

"He didn't know he was an enemy!" Part of my mind was hysterical, and it determined what I said. But something else inside was steady and planning what to do, and its pathology frightened me.

"No matter. We'd intended to eliminate him all along. He forced us to act prematurely." My hysteria persuaded her I was harmless. I'd been waving the gun like Punch with his rubber cudgel. Selina, beaming endearment and sympathy, slunk toward me, reaching out. "Did you know the man?"

My backhand left a red blotch on her milk-white cheek. She was more bewildered than stung, wiped a couple of tears, rallied her charm and tried again. "Arthur, please don't let it torment you. I was in charge of the liquidation, but you can't imagine where my orders came from. Who has a choice anymore?"

I didn't care. My grip on the gun had become more businesslike, and though Selina hadn't lost her composure, I could have pumped her for no end of privileged information. It wouldn't have done me any good. I'd henceforth only do what was necessary, what my innermost calm demanded.

I was no hero who could save the world, or help it in the least. I was even too late to make my own clean break with corruption. I loved Selina too much to let go of her, but I knew too much to accept her unvarnished self. "Smile. Show me how you smiled that night in Montreal, in bed next to me, after the lights went out. I've always wanted to know."

She obliged me. It was the easiest thing to do in her position. I shot her through the heart. She crumpled forward whimpering, and I sidled away as she hit the floor. Free will, a swirling fog around me, lifted at last, and I pocketed my gun and the bullets, and hiked over to Smith Street, wondering

how long the organization would need to catch up with developments. That was last night.

Idle curiosity coaxed me out of bed this morning. Tracking me down and blocking my escape would constitute a brief annoyance for them, an inevitably rigged game I'd play only out of spite and pride. I couldn't guarantee I'd die well, but so what? At this stage you, my imaginary audience, clamor to know what I'm going to do for you. Why not warn the world? Reduce the organization's menace to some degree? Find out something crucial and squirrel it away for your future use?

Save yourselves, dammit. Guard your own acre of reality. Mine came into fruition and exhaustion thanks to Selina. Loving too much commits you for life, bestows a basis for faith and reality, and no substitute will do. It's bigger than your own life, and nothing else matters more. Too much knowledge of Selina corrupted that reality for me, and my sacred duty was to kill her rather than let it languish corrupt.

What more to do afterward than refuse to cooperate? A few minutes early on Westminster Mall, I ducked into the shadow of a black marble alcove kittycorner from the Blackstone. Familiar bureaucrats passed without a word or nod. After half an hour, the sight of another familiar figure, strolling from the direction of College Hill, hit me like venom. Tingling and sluggish, I had to force myself into deeper shadow. Selina, her walk awkward and her smile more of a leer, entered the Blackstone, and my nerves quieted. I checked my wristwatch and inspected my reflection in black marble for any bulge of shoulder holster. I wasn't sweating.

In about fifteen minutes the alleyway door flew open and a dozen trenchcoated Oni poured out and scattered. I slipped into the black marble lobby. A few loped by without seeing me, glass door reflecting morning glare at them. I waited another minute and left, fully aware that for every Oni on the sidewalk, a legion could be airborne. By way of small comfort, I knew the quick pounce wasn't their style.

I went through the motions of skipping town. Ten minutes of crowded pavements and empty bylanes brought me to the cavernous train station. I looked sidelong at the cabbies out front, and pushed by the oaken doors that whooshed behind me as I stopped short. Dour executives and Amtrak workers in blue jumpsuits made echoing footfalls as they crossed my view, and then my coast was clear.

Across the grand lobby and up a long ramp was the platform, the launchpad to anywhere. At the bottom of the ramp was a snack counter, and

slouching against it, a steaming Styrofoam cup in one hand and the other buried in trenchcoat pocket, was a grey man, his complexion unobtrusive in the shade of black Stetson. When he saw that I saw him, he growled so wickedly that an undergrad approaching the counter kept his distance, jaw hanging.

As the Oni straightened up and strode forward, the forgotten coffee sloshed over his hand and he stiffened, his snarl drowned out by the garbled announcement for an incoming train. Enraged he crushed the cup, roared as more coffee scalded his hand, hurled the cup away, and wagged remnant drops off his skin. A gaggle of foolhardy businessmen was openly staring, whereas citizens in the pews were making a point of looking somewhere else. I was already backing out, groping for the door behind me.

I made a beeline for the Greyhound terminal. Winded, I turned around on the steps, but the Oni hadn't followed. Photo booths and phone booths in the narrow corridor to the waiting room were empty, which encouraged me to forge on, and then inertia took over. A trenchcoated man was bent over the pinball machine, scowling at every footfall in earshot, then resuming his game, manically slamming the machine between bells. Without intercepting me, he began pounding on the glass top steadily, cackling at top volume between motionless lips.

I glimpsed two old security guards by the magazine rack looking thoroughly overwhelmed at him. I checked on the demon again, who started toward me, still cackling, and pointing at me. Before he'd entered the waiting room, I was dashing through it, diverting stares from him, stumbling past a door to the bus bays and around the corner. I slowed down and caught my breath. I didn't like providing a show for the nervous people in the bus station's black bucket seats, and I didn't want the Oni gloating that my flight was wild and panicky. Dignity remained an option in this game, which wasn't nearly frenzied enough yet for the Oni to close in.

After several more deep breaths, I meandered along side streets to Kennedy Plaza, a depot for public-transit buses, none of which were currently in. Any would have done. From the shadows of the Art Nouveau octagonal shelter, I noticed a gouty derelict eyeing me from his bench in the scruffy park across the street. With too much agility he sprang up, waved to a geezer at another bench, and both started wading among the cars braking for a red light. I retreated across the street, void of traffic between lights, on the other side of the plaza.

More alleys, then cobblestone streets and parking lots, brought me to the edge of downtown and the entrance ramp for Route 95. I stood before the traffic light at the intersection preceding the ramp, one foot off the curb, thumb held out, wondering if I looked cagey or impatient. Sun on windshields prevented me from seeing the drivers, who had the green light and sped by.

A black Cadillac was first in line at the red, and when it beeped twice, I ran to it, naively exhilarated. I had the passenger door open and was leaning in when I noticed the driver's grey face. He chuckled and patted the seat beside him. I staggered back and slammed the black door.

Suddenly the traffic flow on 95 was super loud, and the cars behind the Oni's were all honking. Shaking a fist at me, he shot forward, leaving black streaks on the curve. From the highway came another outburst of horns as he merged, doubtless with poor grace. As the other drivers went by, frowning suspiciously at me, I grinned and walked away, trying to think.

Step two in the ritual, since escape wasn't happening, was hiding out. Both my place and Selina's were too obvious, which wouldn't stop the demons from staking them out. The organization didn't necessarily know why I'd killed Selina, nor would it care, rightly judging me no more threat than a blemish to be dissolved, a cosmetic matter. Then too I was exercise for their bloodhounds, none of whom confronted me en route to Feder's. Remembering a fire escape out his window, I trotted an extra block to approach from the alley's rear and boosted myself to the steel ladder.

The window was unlocked, the electricity was out, and nobody jumped me when I inspected the rooms. Everything had been replaced or repaired. I left the Frigidaire open to dispel the reek of spoilage, came back after locating the seat farthest from windows, and threw together what wasn't rotten into sandwiches. I had no appetite, but ate for the sake of keeping up strength; ritual defiance again.

By my watch it was eleven when I hunkered down to dispose of the day. Brushing crumbs off my shirt, I contemplated how any quarry, man or beast, would best hold up while holing up. Not by thinking, or he'd go berserk or crack quietly. Any toad or hare would conserve energy, in stasis but not off-guard, intolerant of extraneous input. I could only achieve the rudiments of this state before the ticking of my watch distracted me. Finally I sighed and saw it read 11:45, unstrapped it, and whipped it into ruin against my fauteuil's wooden armrest.

My breathing relaxed. I draped the smashed watch over my thigh, surveyed the shadows lengthen from out of my corner, felt the traffic vibrate the floorboards, and noted the clearing of the thick inner-city air toward dusk.

When the front door's lock jiggled, I leapt from the chair to the square arch between rooms. Light from the hallway emphasized the apartment's darkness and silhouetted the big man shambling in. His lizard voice called out something with the inflections of a name, and he flipped the switch by the door to reveal Dr. Feder's stolen likeness. I shot it through the face, removed its gun from corduroy jacket, and pocketed the bullets. Nice that we all carried .45s.

From the backroom I heard something scraping. By the wall opposite my seat was a dusty velvet armchair, which thank God I hadn't touched all day. It was melting, its arms striving to rise and stretch like a waking man's, the feet elongating. Deep inside was a muffled cackling, but before a mouth surfaced, I fired. The thing shuddered and sagged as it was, while from the corridor, cautious voices and footsteps approached.

I ducked out the window, down the fire escape, and through an alley. The streetlamp at the mouth of the alley came on the instant I glanced at it. I stopped, frightened for the first time all day. I skulked around its white circle as from a judging eye and ran for the nearest side street.

Hat shops and variety stores were just revolving backdrop before Dick's snagged me, probably because it was my only personal connection with this street. I wasn't resigned to the lot of a running target yet. I looked around, hustled inside, and noted that though the posted closing was 4:30, the darkness set the hour at 7:00 or later. The automatic buzzer annoyed me. When it cut out, Dick's dim outline sauntered from behind his partition.

"Well, what can I do for you?" He was too cheerful. I drilled him through the chest, and he toppled over soundlessly. Dodging one aisle to the left, I stooped over and neared the counter, deciding no other Oni would have remained undercover while a good meal flapped away. Others had certainly heard the shot, if every potential storefront refuge hid a demon. Watching the sunken chest bubble, I smiled morosely at Dick's morning surprise if the Oni didn't clean up their mess. I scavenged more bullets from the body and navigated the dark storeroom to the rear alley.

Directly across the street from the alley was a tavern, and I thought about sanctuary there. But I felt like an exile, with a moral constraint against mingling with humanity. I knew too much for that, I knew death wasn't the

end, at least not for the entirety of a person. That was the good news, and the wellspring for however much courage I had. The hungry jaws of the Oni were the long and short of the bad news.

I listened at the pub's gaping doorway, but out of it came gibberish. I belonged inside no more than a ghost or an angel. I was living in a microcosm now, with room for no man but me.

The practical downsides of a tavern hideaway surfaced once I'd skittered away. The Oni could infiltrate any human gathering and capture me, impersonating cops, or drunken pals, or asylum nurses. A shootout was inevitable, and a crowded bar was the worst place to be cornered.

Trudging along, I realized I'd no longer have cared about shooting any number of bystanders. The possibility of having murdered the real Dick interested me briefly, but sparked no concern.

Even this amount of thinking was too much. Something clanged inches behind me, and I turned for a casual look. Streetlamps gave the cobblestones a cold brightness, and shivering in the sebetween two stones was a shiny blade. Above the lamps, warehouse windows were black and impenetrable as the sky, as if the walls were false fronts. But from behind them, echoing back and forth across the street, more and more demon throats took up the imbecile cackle. Knives began raining down, aimed so carelessly I could sprint zigzag to avoid them, like a GI in an occupied village. Breathless, I rounded on them at the corner and fired into an upper window. The laughter paused a minute, then resumed uglier than before.

Past the corner, a straight, short street would terminate on Weybosset. One story up, a fire escape leveled out onto a catwalk the length of the building overshadowing me. Footsteps on the slats clunked toward me, and I aimed just above the railing. Pursuer sprang over the railing to pounce almost before I could shoot, his twisting body knocking me backward. I cursed and pumped two more shells into the twitching thing at my feet. My ears were ringing with the last few seconds' exertion and fury and gunblasts.

I stumbled down the street, red brick wall to my left, white wall of St. Francis Monastery to my right. Stained glass cast warm colored patches on the sidewalk, and I pictured contented monks snoozing within. On the portico, the welcoming mosaic of St. Francis in Apennine terrain was obscured by a huddled shape that flattened needlessly as I fired wild and blinded St. Francis. Cursing some more, I careened onto Weybosset, seeking a nook where I could reload.

The first gloomy doorway that caught my eye was good enough. I paid no attention to the long cliffside of wall across the street, with its rows of drawn venetians or black panes. Why kindle fresh anxieties about demonic impatience with the chase? In their clumsy but vicious way they were starting to close in, and some might be trying to organize. With no past left or future to speak of, this game of killing and evasion meant continuity, a life in quintessence, everything. I wasn't reconciled to making a stand.

Running zigzag again I got across Weybosset and slowed within the shadows. A shabby man whose teeth and white hair had both gone yellow hobbled from out of the streetlight and asked me something in a dog voice without consonants. Reflexively I shot before he even saw the revolver, and he folded up whining. I weathered a brief wave of shock that, likely as not, I'd executed a genuine drifter. Maybe he'd saved me while I reloaded, if the Oni wanted to attack without the amenity of changing form for bystanders' sakes.

My remorse passed. The man was an intruder. My microcosm had its laws of survival, with no more room for conscience or morals than in the jungle.

The nearest alley's brick walls were painted black, sawdust covered the ground, and the windows had heavy bars and grates. The brilliant pod of a streetlight was bracketed to the wall a few feet overhead and powered by a long metal stalk from underground. I stopped to stare as at a long-lost idol. A jabbering turned me around in time to yelp at a stone against my cheek, and as I reeled back, the light burst and showered me with slivers. When I lowered my arms, the Oni were gone, probably waiting for the shabby man to expire. I pressed on.

I crossed Westminster Mall and kept going. It was too wide and well-lit for evasive maneuvers on my part, and too late did I realize the first alley off it was little better. High walls on both sides were thick with fire escapes, and were linked overhead by a plain plaster-sheathed gangway calling itself the "Tri-Store Bridge." I stopped, unwilling to backtrack or advance, dipping a shoe in a puddle that never dried, fed constantly by gurgling pipes low in the walls.

The stench of pigeons and piss annoyed me. I heard angry whispering from above. Why hadn't they attacked? Their hearts were no longer set on a moving target. Over the voices of demons and drainpipes rose the caterwaul of a police siren. On the fire escapes, silhouettes were rattling to and fro like chimps in cages. The siren that made them cringe goaded me into scrambling headlong.

I dove into the porn shop toward the corner. Panting for breath in the G-rated anteroom, I focused on the comic books, refusing to turn and acknowledge the manager in his inner sanctum. My reality had no room for him.

After the siren faded, the Oni would have me trapped. If they hadn't dragged off the shabby man's corpse, the police would be searching for a gunman on foot, but the double whammy out there of cops plus Oni was better than game over if I stayed put. My final standoff wouldn't be here. At worst I'd end up demon bait in a jail cell. I inhaled and bounded into the shadows of Washington Street.

At a glance, the building I faced was vaguely familiar, as if from decades ago, and I wasted precious seconds staring till I recognized the site of my detective bureau. I felt nothing, but then the name Selina came unbidden to mind like a wilful ghost. I got the shakes and took off running, and to throw off tender memories tried pinpointing where echoing sirens were coming from.

The forsaken mass of the hulking Biltmore Hotel brought me short. Kennedy Plaza was on the other side. The Oni could easily nail me there before I'd reached any cover, and two squad cars were always stationed at each end. I turned on my heel, up Eddy Street, toward the mall again.

I passed the Miles Building. Its walls up to the eaves were of aqua vinyl, and then Second Empire dormers and minarets emerged, with dense ornament like tropical fungus. New decorative touches fidgeted impulsively. Oni were perched like gargoyles on every peak, glaring down at me. They still postponed attacking while the sirens threatened complications, so I cackled up at them and headed onto the mall.

I had to rest. My legs weighed tons, my lungs were spent, despite unflagging willpower. I needed a vantage in a building that afforded the demons negligible cover, and where it wouldn't be obvious I'd ventured in. From there I could decide how much longer I wanted to live.

After one more block of the mall, the street counterintuitively narrowed for normal traffic. I staggered along the sidewalk in the throes of fatigue. Several dozen yards ahead hung the bright circle of the Arcade clock, suspended from a long wrought-iron bar. It was only 8:01. The sirens were obnoxiously loud, maybe sending the demons into hiding or into a careless rage, sneering jealously at those mortal others hunting me. If the cops missed me in the next few seconds, they'd be a godsend.

Here was my ideal building, a Greek Revival temple of commerce from the 1820s, allegedly America's first roofed galleria. The entry was locked, and the three levels of balconies were too open for demons to hide effectively while spying on passersby. I gathered the sturdiest empty crates from the alleys on either side of the Arcade, and piled them under one of the curly iron rods from which dangled an unlit spherical lamp.

I climbed up, jumped, caught the rod, traversed its length hand-over-hand, clambered frantically onto the second-floor railing. I wormed over, hit the floor, rolled flat, and looked streetward. The distance down seemed much greater than the distance up. I noted gratefully that my leap had scattered the boxes into outwardly purposeless rubbish.

Headlights approached, and the sirens were deafening. I rolled farther in, more to escape the volume than the police per se, and listened as the cruiser stopped and its doors slammed. Men spoke, but my ears were disoriented, unable to arrange the inflections into English. They kicked the boxes around, laughed, got back in the cruiser, and drove away, siren at full blast. I didn't understand or care about their behavior. They were no immediate menace and didn't matter. I was thinking without foresight, like any four-footed prey, and accepted that without qualms.

I slid back several yards down the aisle before standing up, momentarily safe. Any Oni in the building would already have attacked while I was down. The galleries were silent as a vacuum, easily absorbing my careful footfalls. The roof was all tinted skylight and lent a bluish glow to the Ionic columns upholding it. Each of the three levels had a continuous aisle, and was recessed slightly from the level below. Hanging plants brushed my face every so often, and hanging black-and-white shop signs receded like dominoes.

I passed a goldsmith, antiques, a photographer, a handwriting analyst and spiritual counselor, a travel bureau, all rendered congruous in this matrix of antebellum architecture. The wooden floors, slanting enough to test my balance, accentuated my fatigue, and I sought a door nobody would bother to wire against burglars. Maintenance Department looked good. The lock was too old to put up real resistance.

Without resorting to the lights I located a chair behind a nicked, battered desk and sat in darkness and silence a while. On the desk was a radio. I doubted a reasonable amount of background sound would pose any harm. Words and music rippled out incoherently. I grew curious about the Oni, whose ranks seemed coordinated only by uniformly increasing amounts of

impatience and frustration. After sufficient time, all might wonder at once whether any of the others had spotted me. I sat a little longer, then went out to listen, leaving the radio on.

The radio faded as voices from the street came into range, cuing me to drop upon knees and crawl toward the rail. I didn't have to get close enough to see the speakers. Through the railing slats I could discern the dark reflections of Stetsons and trenchcoats in the shop window across the street. Apparently we'd arrived at the hour they felt safe in stalking openly, no more ambush, sniping, or lurking in depots. I beat the urge to join their game, leap like a beast among them. My superiority lay in making them come to me.

About half a dozen deliberated in dog language for a while, and several more showed up, the glint of pistols in their reflections. About time the Oni reached the conclusion that the night was too quiet for me to be out walking among them. Like the police, they were kicking the crates around, drawn to them without recognizing why, till one booted one box to land atop another, and he goggled at it and started jabbering.

The surrounding Oni glowered at him for interrupting their conference till he pointed at the pair of boxes, and then up in my general direction. They all peered up and then at nothing in particular while they concentrated. Simultaneously they glared toward me, baring teeth, and instantly tiny globes of light floated in their places, spiraling up to my gallery. I stumbled up and back into the Maintenance Department.

I switched off the radio. I'd make nothing easier for them. For the foreseeable future I'd kill so many that survivors would snarl aghast at all the souls escaping uneaten. I sighed and waited. Contemptuous and hushed I sat, while demons singly and in couples crossed the doorway's dim light like shoppers. Some strolled, some hurried, some scrambled to false alarms. A few doors were kicked in and locks yanked off, leading me to ruminate over the outcome if police overheard and barged in. I didn't ruminate long. Police, law, interference had become idle fantasy, as had everything outside the moment.

A demon paused at my door. I didn't move. The silhouette in frosted glass tugged at the doorknob and became flesh. Only my hand budged, to aim and fire before he could yell. Without premeditation I was bent over the quivering body to relieve it of pistol, and up on my feet again in the doorway. The shot had brought the pack running, but I hadn't been cornered, and I had the inspiration of the casualty at my feet.

Demonic modus operandi of capture and humiliation before the kill worked to my advantage. A gun in each fist, I trod squarely into the aisle, fired three times into one oncoming stampede, about-faced and did the same to the onrush from the other direction. While the unwounded scattered, I cast my empty guns to the ground floor and looted new ones from the dead and the injured who lacked strength to vanish, pulsing in and out of translucence as they writhed.

No sooner had I pocketed two revolvers and reloaded two than more demons spewed out of doorways and dark corners. After the third try they learned, and left me alone while they cobbled together a plan.

At either end of the gallery, the Oni as globes of light roiled like a cloud of gnats, their language reduced to twitterings. Irritated I paced back and forth, feeling caged, then realizing I was caged and didn't like it. I refused to be cornered while I had any choice, and strode to the railing, brandishing pistols, to lure the Oni out of the air. They'd stop me, and kill me, but at least I could push them into killing without capturing me, a moral victory, to style the inevitable into giving them no satisfaction. What more could I do?

From above swished something too fast to follow, and my forearm was snared in a lasso, half a dozen demons doing their best to haul me up and dislocate my elbow. I swore and fired the gun in my free hand at them, their fingers already clawing at my sleeve. Some howled and they rescattered, and the drop onto my back stunned me for a second. I craned my neck, but the demons on the topmost level were gone.

I got up unsteadily, battling vertigo and a ringing in my ears that sharpened into the droning of more Oni than before, swarming around both ends of the gallery. I started toward the teeming lights again, groggy enough for them to dazzle me. From a doorway thrust a demon like a barracuda, slashing hard at my nearer hand. The pain cleared my head as tendons snapped and the gun fell from useless fingers. I snarled and hissed as well as any demon, emptying my other gun into the assailant before he could do anything more. He fell back twisting like a snake, and grinning, I traded my spent gun for the one he'd dropped.

No more snipers were visible above or ahead, but the three-story chasm within the galleries churned with globes, thicker than dust in a sunbeam, tinted an icy blue by the skylight. Gritting my teeth against their chorus, harsh and loud as a chainsaw, I advanced again. I had to pull off my tie and loosen my collar, dizzy and breathless in the wet, tropical heat the demon horde was generating.

The Oni at the end had some reason for hovering farther out above the street, but that didn't stop me. Once I emerged from under the third floor's balcony, my railing was in reach. Something clicked overhead, and an arc blasted into the floorboards a pace away. The world was mute, my ears numb and throbbing, and above me leaned three demons laughing noiselessly and cradling tommyguns, one of which was smoking.

Meanwhile Oni slunk toward me from the acute angle beneath the staircase to the third floor. Again I forged ahead, assuming the tommyguns were meant to fence me now and kill me later. When I ignored a second strafe at my feet, the gunner had to swing wild. A few demons behind me went down clutching at surprise wounds, and their cohorts hopped back, barking curses loud enough to hear through the tinnitus. In this brief lull, the pain in my gushing hand irked me like the first nausea of a suicide full of pills. The only remedy was oblivion.

More Oni grabbed my jacket as I bolted for the rail. I pulled out of the sleeves, roaring as my gash tore wider. The gun in my good hand I flung to the street, and vaulted over the rail after it. En route down, my good hand tried closing on a spherical lamp but couldn't hold on. My bad hand managed only to slap the globe. I rolled with the impact but heard an ankle crack, and prayed I wouldn't have time to feel it.

I limped over to the gun and looked up. On the white globe was a smeared red handprint. Beyond it were demons leering over, with hundreds more droning behind them, setting the whole Arcade aglow. More buzzed directly over me, then whizzed back to join the swarm.

I emptied my gun at the balcony and lurched away without seeing if I'd hit anyone. That too had outlived its importance. Out of habit I kept the gun as I made for the next alley, several buildings away. After ducking in, I saw the brick dead end, ten feet high. I wasn't disappointed. I was tired. The back of another building behind the dead end loomed ethereal like a vision. Turning back to the alley's mouth, I slumped against trash barrels and waited, and watched the demons gather and gloat, and I thought of you and the past.

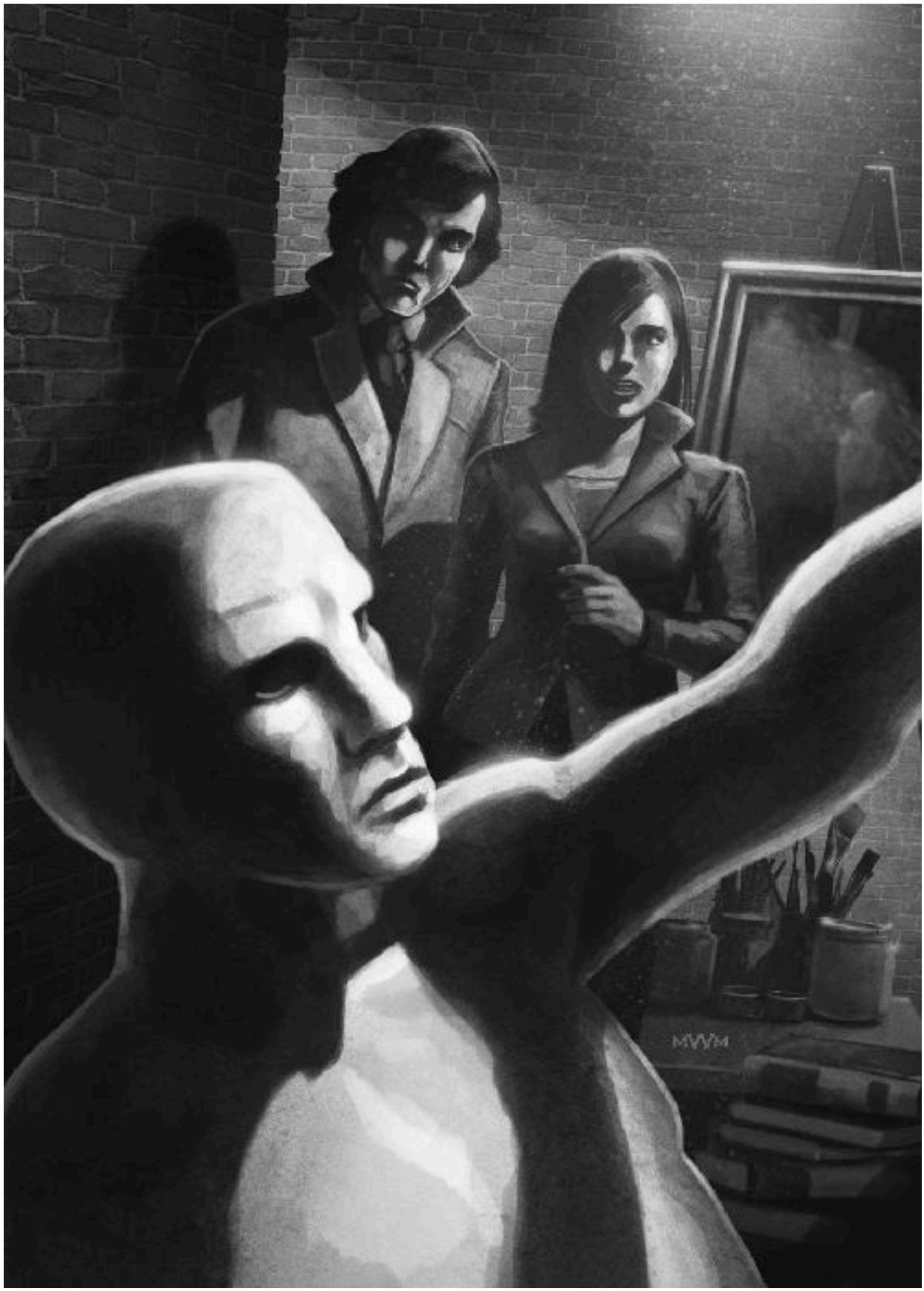
I'll play it through for you like a newscaster. Some two dozen Oni are squirming for a view past the three who sneer at me, brandishing tommyguns. A car door slams and the Oni are in synch as they gawk and scatter or vanish. The three executioners hold their ground as a cop shambles over, not even glancing in my direction. My heart beats faster despite my better judgment, my hope an unwanted reflex.

Cop and demons converse, with the artillery of no concern to either party. The cop yawns, takes off his cap to scratch his head, and replaces the cap. He says something at which the demons nod obediently, and he waves good-night. In seconds there are more spectators than ever.

Why should I resist the vice of dividing humanity down the middle? Some ultimately obey others, the rest, ultimately, themselves. The present moment is the undisguised price the latter eventually pay for their integrity.

Maybe my soul has a sporting chance. Keeping the mob at a distance also forces the gunners back, and none are flitting overhead yet.

The mob is getting pushy, though, and for the privilege of the kill, the gunners will have to act. I drop my pistol and stand up away from the trash barrels. The killers take aim, and by reflex I hold up my hands as if to ward off bullets. I laugh at myself, a little too loud, and staccato enough to make a segue for the guns.


MVM

PICKMAN'S LAZARUS

W. H. Pugmire

1. The Past

She was sitting in a North End café when the gentleman first approached her. Introducing himself as Mr. Richard Peters, he expressed keen admiration for the young woman's two collections of decadent poetry. She smiled and invited him to join her at the table.

"It's a novelty to actually meet someone who's read my books. No publisher would touch them, so I published them myself and lost a heap of money. Thankfully, I have lots of Bohemian pals who wanted copies, so I got rid of a bunch of them at Christmas, that dreary holiday."

She watched as the fellow reached into the satchel that he had set on the floor and bring out a small sketchpad. "Would you mind if I sketch you as we speak? Your face fascinates me."

No one had ever drawn her portrait, and the woman found the idea ridiculously appealing. Leaning back in her chair, she pouted prettily as his pencil raced across the paper. "Are you native to Boston, Mr. Peters?"

"I'm from Salem; but Boston is my adopted home, and I feel a close affinity with its soil, with its history. You were born here, were you not, Miss Eliot?"

"I was—and please call me Tara. I like what you said, about feeling a kinship with the city's soil and past. That's a recurring theme in my work." The woman stopped talking and observed him as he sketched. He possessed the strangest face she had ever seen; and although he was not handsome, something, some kind of weird vitality, made him alluring. She shivered slightly when his jade eyes shifted from looking at his sketchpad and peered into her own; for she imagined that he could see the depths of her being, all the things that twisted her soul and tainted her wild imagination.

Tara's fingers itched for her own pad and pen; for the presence of this peculiar fellow so agitated her mind's eye that she wanted to try expressing the sensation in lines of verse. Without realizing that she was speaking aloud, the poet began to improvise a poem.

"Then from some realm of dream and darkness came

The stranger with his quite peculiar eyes,
Those orbs of jade that seemed to paralyze
My soul, as if my senses he might maim.
I knew that I would follow his commands,
Would ache to know the secrets of his soul,
Would bend to his implacable control,
Would relish any peril by his hands."

Holding up one large dark hand, he stopped her speech. "You weave a fantasy I have no intention of realizing. If I desire to capture your 'soul,' it's on paper only. *Voilà*." Tara gazed at her portrait on his pad. He was good—very good, if a trifle macabre; for he had somehow managed to suggest, subtly, the formation of the skull beneath her face, and he had infused her eyes with an expression that suggested the secrets that might be burning in her brain.

"I'm impressed. Where may one see more of your work?"

He lowered the pad and studied the ceiling light for a moment, and then without looking at her he said, "I have a studio down an alley nearby. It's a crumbling place, but it suits me. I paint in the cellar, by amber candlelight, as I listen to whatever scuttles behind the walls in search of food—that never-ending hunt." He smiled at her in a way that made her feel slightly hunted herself, and the way Tara returned his smile suggested that she would not mind any chase. She stood and, bending, reached for his carpetbag, which was surprisingly weighty. Tara then offered the artist her free hand; and, after a moment's hesitation, he stood, took the young woman's hand in his, and led her to his secret haunt.

Tara breathed in cool autumn air as the tall hulking figure beside her led the way through forgotten alleyways, past crumbling buildings with gabled roofs and weathered chimneys from which dislodged bricks had tumbled to the ground. Tara watched, slyly, the tread of Peters and wondered why he seemed so clumsy; and she noticed the way the moonlight shimmered on the dusky surface of his face and within the depths of his green eyes. They entered a darker, narrower alley, and then the artist stopped before a worm-eaten wall where planks covered windows. Reaching into his pocket, the fellow produced a small flashlight, and in its glow there was revealed an ancient ten-paneled door, which the artist unlocked. But before he pushed open the door, he turned to face her and frowned as she laughed.

“What?” he asked her.

Tara pointed to the antique door. “They’ve put it on crookedly. Look at how it slants.”

Peters offered her an oblique smile. “The world, you’ll find, is just a bit aslant here. Set my bag on that wooden chair near you.” The artist shut his eyes and breathed deeply of the alley air; and as Tara observed his behavior, she fancied that his nostrils seemed far wider than she remembered them being. But perhaps this was merely the result of how the shadows of the place played upon his visage. “It’s like being in another world, isn’t it—an elder realm? There’s some heaviness in the darkness that one feels pressing against one’s soul, and the smell seems a fragrance from another age.” Holding the flashlight at his waist, he raised its head so that the beam of light illuminated his face from beneath; and the effect of his partial countenance thus irradiated had a sinister quality that thrilled Tara’s imagination with a sense of subtle fear. The man chuckled lowly, turned from her and pushed open the door, then led her into a bleak hallway where the walls wore a remnant of dark-oak paneling.

Tara watched him close and lock the door behind them. “I can’t imagine you need to do that in so desolate a place. I’ve never felt so—far away from life.” Reaching to a table, Peters picked up a box of wooden matches, struck one match, and used it to light a candle. The small flame appeared impossibly bright, and in its glow Tara noticed the look of superiority that danced in the fellow’s eyes—and perhaps a touch of lunacy as well.

Peters walked a little from her and raised his candle’s flame to the nearest wall; and the silence in the hallway seemed to change into a different kind of quiet, an almost supernatural hush. Without speaking, Tara went to the artist, took the candle from his hand, and held it to the canvas nearest her. “This is blasphemous,” she told him. “The bestial priest who holds up the Eucharist, with the tangled strands of filthy hair that conceal so much of his face, cannot be wholly human. There’s something wickedly canine in the way he slouches, and an evil glint twinkles in the eye that is not concealed by matted hair. His crooked mouth is cruel, and you can just make out the bit of—something—hanging from one corner of it. The host itself, held in two dirty paws, is larger than usual and jagged in its shape; and then one notices how it resembles the hole in the hanging eidolon of Christ, that hole where a portion of skin is missing.” Tara raised one hand and touched it to the canvas, and then shuddered as she took her hand away quickly. “Can

you sense how the painting is as aged as it is immoral—old in an almost impious way? And that hoary frame is from another century."

"The frame is indeed antique," the artist acquiesced. "But the work is modern—for I painted it last year. But how charming that you fancy it so old. It exhibits my one great artistic aim—to catch an aura of the past, an evocation of ancient things." He smiled at her and winked. "I had a hunch you'd like it, decadent artist that you are." Tara backed away, turned her face from the wall, and handed the candle back to Peters. He watched her for a while as he held the candle near her face. "You turn from its image, and yet you quiver to gaze on it again. Of what are you afraid?"

"That it will consume me," was her instant answer, and then she frowned at her improbable words.

"What ecstasy—to be consumed by Art!" was his reply. "But come—my studio is in the cellar, and I think you'll appreciate my newest work, which is close to completion."

Tara's host guided her through a candlelit movement that took them down damp stone steps to a large open space crowded with easels on which unfinished works were propped. Peters walked to an acetylene gas fixture on one wall and turned a valve until the room was dimly lit, and then he walked to another wall and repeated the action, so that faint but steady lamplight fell upon a queer display. Tara saw the low rectangular slab composed of mortar-held bricks and with a smooth cement top on which a figure reclined. Peters moved to place the candleholder on a tall stand that stood beside an easel that held a large quadrangular canvas. Approaching the canvas, the young woman studied the almost-ethereal being there depicted. The creature's flesh was of a pale sepia hue and silky in texture, without wrinkle or blemish. Long strands of flat amber hair extended from its wide dome, and one lean arm was raised above the body, stretching toward a spherical blur that might have been a weird representation of the moon, or perhaps a primordial face.

"Like the other work you saw above, this is religious in nature, my inspiration being the rising of the biblical Lazarus of Bethany. Have you read the Gospel of John, Tara? It's the one gospel that completely captures my imagination—there is so much strangeness in it. Now the Christ raised the corpse after it had lain in its tomb for four days, and I can't help thinking it should have rested only three days, to align with the myth of the Messiah's resurrection. This restoration to life was the seventh of Christ's

‘miracles.’ Numbers can have an uncanny significance, one finds; they can bend the barrier betwixt reality and dream, between existence and extinction. I rather like the idea of such a dimension—indeed, it’s a bit of a fixation for me! Thus I’ve tried to express it in this work. I obtained a model that was but newly deceased, and etched between her thighs the sigils that signify the potency of exhalation.” He stepped toward her through the shadows, until his face was very near her own, and she felt his hot breath on her face. “Oh, the *power* of the pant! How is it described in Genesis? ‘And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’ The nostrils, mind you, not the mouth.” He bent to Tara then, and for a moment she fancied that he would kiss her. Instead, he lifted his mouth to her nostrils and inhaled.

A hollow noise sounded in the spacious room. Tara pushed away from Peters and looked at one obscure portion of the cellar’s earthen floor where she espied a circular brick promontory that rose six inches above the ground. “Is that a well? I’ve heard about the hidden wells that exist in some of the oldest dwellings of the city. There are supposedly networks of underground tunnels that were used by smugglers and pirates in the early era.”

Peters watched as she drifted to the brick curb, knelt before it, and placed her hands on the heavy discoidal cover of cool wood that concealed an aperture. A dull echo sounded deep beneath the disc, and Tara moved with outré motion as she crawled onto the thick wooden surface and pressed her nostrils to it. The fetor that infiltrated the cellar issued from whatever place existed beneath the well.

The woman turned her head and glanced at Peters; and then, noticing the large camera on a long table, she pointed to it. “Take my photograph, Richard. I’ll pose with your creation on its slab. Then, when you bring the photo to life on canvas, you can call it a macabre marriage of life and death.” Pushing off the disc, Tara walked crookedly to the display that was depicted on the painter’s canvas. Sitting next to the reclining, motionless model, she touched her hand to the texture of its faux flesh. “It’s warm, this thing. Whatever did you construct it with? It’s so silky, like some kind of polished bone.” Scooting up the slab, Tara ran her fingers against the model’s strands of hair. “The head has a rather monstrous shape—and yet, there seems to be a hint of nobility in the width of brow. How clever of you,

to combine beauty with grotesquerie. Yes, it does look like something that hasn't been dead for long, that hasn't yet been completely corrupted by extermination. Lord, as I smooth its sensuous mouth with my fingers I can almost sense an overwhelming hunger on its lips."

Shadows moved around her as Tara bent low and pressed her lips to the model's mouth. Shutting her eyes, the woman moaned as a silky hand wound its talons through her hair and began to combs the strands. She lifted her head a little and saw the colorless eyes that gazed into her own; and then the model on the slab raised its head to the poet's and began to suck the breath that issued from Tara's nostrils.

II. The Narrative of Grevel Zhukovsky

I moved among the crowd, in the small gallery, with a plastic cup of peach champagne in hand, when I espied the youthful figure of Miles Kogos working his way toward me, his bright eyes aimed at mine. He stopped a few feet from me, hesitant and awkward; and so I held to him my hand and smiled. Stepping forward, his hand clasped my own.

"Mr. Kogos. I'm an admirer of your 'Midnight' series; and in those canvases, if I may be bold, I see the influence of Pickman, especially in choice of color. Is this your first glance at the exhibition?"

"It is, Mr. Zhukovsky."

"Please, call me Grevel. Come, let us examine these prints together." He looked at me strangely, and I knew that my sudden friendliness surprised him. I cultivate an antisocial reputation, and the only time I make myself available publicly is where there is a new opening that interests me. I rarely exhibit my own canvases, and I never 'entertain' at home.

We pushed through the throng, to the wall on which the framed photographs had been arranged. "It's rather incredible, these photos being found." Kogos spoke in a high-pitched voice, the nasal quality of which many found annoying. "Weird things keep cropping up in the cellars and attics of old Boston. Do we know how Tara Eliot came to possess these originals?"

"It's rumored that she knew the artist personally, but that has never been confirmed. She got to know his elderly father quite well, and Mr. Pickman presented these stills to Miss Eliot in his final years, after his failure to place his son's paintings with some of the Boston galleries and institutions.

Amusing, isn't it, how institutions are still cautious about obtaining Pickman works, despite the ridiculous sums some of them now command."

A low breathy chuckle escaped his mouth. "They're still intimidated by the power of his revelations, and confused by the emotions his canvases can evoke. Look at that largest of the photographs, the one people call his 'Lazarus.' That image contains everything that made Pickman a genius—and everything that made people call him monstrous. I've never known an artist whose personal character was so tied to his art, in a defaming manner. Because he captured so completely what has been labeled 'inhuman,' the myth imparts, his heart and soul must have been those of a cruel and satanic monster. When Rupert Coil's brief biography of Pickman came out, and he quoted from the correspondence of people who knew the artist, he published only those excerpts that painted Pickman as some unearthly beast who began to grow more hideous as he aged—mentally, spiritually, and physically."

I stood nearer the photograph of Pickman's 'Lazarus' and fogged its plate of glass with my breath. "It's so peculiar, what some of you observers say and see. I find nothing 'monstrous' in this image; unless you mean the reclining figure—and that merely looks alien, in an eerie yet beguiling kind of way. As with so many of Pickman's 'models,' this figure seems almost an eidolon of a thing perhaps less than human—or other than human. How different it is from the artist's dark-hued ghouls. It's so pale one fancies that a special source of illumination had been rigged near or over it, so as to enhance its pallidity. The scene itself, the dirt of the alley and the hoary brick of the leaning warehouses or whatever they may be, are Pickman staples and illustrate his love of olden things, of hidden spots, those pockets of the past that may be found in New England. These 'abandoned' lanes or alleys reappear again and again on his canvases. So many of the places he portrayed have now been lost, destroyed as the city became restructured and modernized; and now so many of his scenes seem, to me, places of fable, and it's difficult to believe that some of them actually existed in mundane reality—despite such photographic proof as we have here."

"Well," my companion said, "his creatures are certainly mythical. I mean, look at the figure reclining on its slab! That is a creation of pure imagination that has nothing to do with reality. God, I wish he had painted this photograph!"

I smiled secretly. Looking around, I saw that the gallery was becoming more crowded, and the sight of so many people annoyed me; so, making my excuses to the fellow beside me, I made my way through the crowd and stepped outside. Some few stars twinkled above, but the moon was concealed behind a sheath of dark clouds. I was about to hail a cab when I sensed someone near me. I turned and encountered again the smiling, anxious face of young Miles Kogos. "Would you care to share a cab?" I asked, sensing his desire to speak with me a little longer.

"I have a car, actually. Let me drive you home. There are so few people that understand and appreciate Pickman as I do, and it would please me to share some ideas and such with you—if you wouldn't find it boring."

"It wouldn't bore me at all. It's early yet. I had to get out of that crowd, I couldn't breathe; but it would charm me to sit with you in my library and discuss art, or whatever else you like. We could look at my work and you could explain the similarities you see between my canvases and Pickman's."

"Great! My car's just over there."

He was in a state of heightened excitement and chattered nonstop during our drive to my house in the Hyde Park area. We stepped out of the car and I led him along the gravel path that took us to a side entrance leading into my kitchen.

"Why don't I brew some coffee, and then we can retire to my library and discuss art."

"Could that wait until after I've looked at some of your work?" He was trying to act adult and restrained, but I could see a kind of juvenile stimulation shimmering in his eyes. "It's so seldom that I get to speak to others who appreciate Pickman as I do. And you are more than just an admirer—you're an actual student of his style, an artist who pays homage to his genius with works of your own. I don't understand why you don't exhibit your work more vigorously, and then spread the word about Boston's most notorious painter."

"The world would not welcome such advocacy," I explained; and then I walked to a long hallway and switched on the special lighting I had had installed there. I turned to Kogos, but he looked past me, at the frames on the hallway walls. When he took a few steps forward, I held up my hand to halt him. "Pickman was universally reviled when he lived, when he wasn't being utterly ignored. His canvases unnerved communities, as did his

character; and this dislike heightened as he aged, causing several former associates to split with him. When Coil interviewed some few survivors of that company when he was working on his book, the message was always the same: Pickman became diseased as he aged—mentally, spiritually, and physically. It was as if traits of the fiends he painted were being applied, in subtle yet unspeakable measures, to his persona. It's really an extremely unusual phenomenon, if it contains any validity. What could possibly cause Pickman's art to breed alterations to his form, his core being? The more he changed, the more … *powerful* … his art became. He painted darkness as if he understood every aspect of it intimately. He revealed aspects of shadow, and what lurks within it, that no one had ever perceived before; and to witness such things while gazing on his canvases is to feel a kind of psychic threat. His art was the work of madness, many claimed, and to look on it was to be threatened with implacable lunacy oneself."

I moved down the hallway and stopped before one of my paintings, a canvas that I had labeled "Old Brick Row." It was a work of almost vague darkness, oppressed by formless shadows and blurred lines. Yet the more one looked at it, the more one discerned, and the lines became the walls of brick structures that had reached a state of great decrepitude. In the middle of the painting was a street or alley composed of packed dirt, and the road seemed, in some strange way, as shabby and decayed as the buildings on either side of it. Within the midst of unrelenting darkness, however, one could almost detect a faint mist or cloud of meager illumination that might have been a reflection of moonlight; but then one sensed that the thing was in fact a questing wraith that roamed down the lane in search of something lost and unattainable.

"This painting is clearly in the Pickman tradition," I explained to my guest. "But it lacks his power; it doesn't pull the viewer in. We stand and study it, but we do not become a part of it. That's where my work fails, you see, no matter how near I get to his manner. This is merely a representation, an echo—not a thing that *lives*. On a Pickman canvas, the fabulous darkness throbs with a kind of uncanny promise, and as we stare at that darkness we feel as if we might become lost within it. We feel his murkiness creep beyond the framed canvas and imagine that it might nestle in the chamber with us." I turned to Kogos and smiled whimsically. "I can never compete with his genius, much as I want to pay tribute to it in these paintings."

He nodded as if he understood. “And so you don’t exhibit them, feeling yourself a failure.” He got closer to the painting as if trying to see things in it that had eluded him. “But still—you’ve captured *something* …” We walked slowly past two other canvases. “But, yes, I see what you mean. Your trees are very different from his—they lack the sensuousness of the limbs he painted, and their peculiarity of color. And all your works are merely scenic, vacant of beings. It was Pickman’s ghouls and daemons that gave his paintings a lot of their potency. The faces he portrayed— *God* !”

We came to the end of the hallway, and he studied the large painting on the wall that faced us. I could almost feel his sudden confusion as he peered at the image on the wall.

“It is with this canvas that I have gotten nearest to my Maître,” I whispered. “And, as you see, there *is* a figure on the slab. You’ll recognize the source of inspiration, of course.”

Kogos nodded. “It’s a fine imitation of the ‘Lazarus’ photo,” he agreed. “And here you really *have* captured the voluptuous character of Pickman’s trees, with those two creatures that spread their branches over the mortuary slab. Damn, I almost want to wind myself inside those supple limbs and feed on leaves.” He laughed feebly; and then his voice grew strange. “This isn’t at all like your other work. Why, it could be by Pickman himself. Even the color tone is far closer to his than anything in your other stuff,” and he waved to the canvases behind us. “And that model—holy hell! It’s even weirder than what he used in the photograph! It—it *lives*!”

I tilted my head and nodded. “But in what an odd way it exists—almost as if it represents the ultimate symbol of everything a Pickman model should express, ideally realized. Because a part of Richard’s fantastic ability was to capture a kind of dimension between what is and what should never be, a dimension between reality and dream, darkness and light, existence and extinction. That was one of the reasons he was shunned in life, you know—because in his ghouls people could see their own potential fiendishness, an unspeakable part of themselves that was morbidly less than human.”

“But the figure painted here is unlike his dark ghouls and decayed humans. It’s completely alien. The texture of its flesh might be composed of corporeal moonlight, ridiculous as such an idea seems. And, damn, it has a kind of hunger, doesn’t it? Similar to the sensuousness of Pickman’s trees, the limbs that are so diabolically inviting.” Kogos backed away a little and

looked at the painting as a frown began to form on his youthful face. “You didn’t paint this. You couldn’t have captured Pickman’s essence so completely. It’s by him, isn’t it? *By god*, a lost Pickman! It’s priceless! No wonder you never invite anyone into your home. If word got out about this …!”

My chuckle was low and soft. I sighed, turned from him, and walked out of the hallway, to a door that opened onto the back yard and its high stone walls. Stars twinkled in the sky, but a dark cloud still concealed the moon. Eventually Kogos came out of the house, and when he saw the slab at the farthest end, between two trees, he nearly yelped. He began to babble questions, but I ignored him as I removed my shirt and hairpiece and let them fall onto the ground. Walking to the slab, I reclined upon its cool surface and raised one hand to the cloud that obscured the moon. That cloud began to drift from the lunar disc, and my flesh drank moonlight. I could feel the astral chill on the texture of that which was my semblance of flesh, and I moaned in pleasure as my upraised arm began to glow with a kind of shimmering luminosity. The air around me became frigid, as was attested when Kogos stood above me, his breath issuing as fine mist from mouth and nostrils as he witnessed my transition and its revelation. My upheld hand motioned to him, and he sat beside me on the antique slab. I wound my fingers into his hair and pulled his face to mine; and then I lifted my lips to the breath that wafted from his nostrils, pressed my mouth onto his face, and forcefully inhaled.

THE CRIMSON FOG

Mark Samuels

Prologue

How far does reality extend? That's the question I keep asking myself.

Across billions of light-years to the mysterious point where the cosmos curves back on itself and the laws of time and space cease to apply? Only just as far as that visible universe mankind can detect and analyse with his instruments? Or is it confined solely within the limits of the skull of each and every isolated person who asks the question?

I think back to the half-ruined temple and its cryptic banners riddled with mandalas. A temple hidden high up on the mountain peak above the jungles of Chang-Yi province, right in the middle of the outland where wreathes the crimson fog and wherein dwell all the fiends with their rites of silent horror. I think of Major Qersh, his deadly revelations, his corpse-eyes, and that same message from him that I heard over the chopper's radio headset. I wonder where Mayhew and Koszalski are now. I try not to look at Yian-Ho.

The final events of my life play themselves out over and over again in my mind as I try to decide just what to do next.

My thoughts are like a maelstrom.

I think I hear the sound of thunder coming from far off.

The past, the present and the future merge into a singularity.

1

You know, like everyone else, how it began. There was nothing of any interest in that region before. The whole area, a thousand square miles of it, had been a wasteland of parched earth and scrub. Only the wind and the occasional band of nomadic tribesmen occasionally crossed it—that was all. And then, from out of nowhere, the crimson fog had appeared. The satellite images made it look like a pool of blood had formed on the far side of the Asian continent in the territorially disputed Chang-Yi province. And inside the wreathlike folds of the fog there appeared a brand new terrain; jungles, mountains, and the monstrous things that lived in that landscape. And the

really damnable thing was this: the fog had a height equivalent to our atmosphere. It made no sense, but there it was. All this and a maximum visibility inside it of ten yards.

Of course we investigated. Firstly teams of Chinese went in, but they never came back. Then the Russians sent men in and they didn't reappear either. They were all swallowed up in the crimson fog. Some fragmentary reports made it out, all crazy and unbelievable. Accounts of fantastic jungles consisting of slimy creepers and giant twisted, deformed trees. No fauna of any kind in the vegetation except for the killers. Those diabolical things must have consumed all the other flesh in the jungle long before they got a taste for men.

You'll remember, I'm sure, the furore that erupted when it was revealed to the world in a photographic exclusive by some American journalist that the fiends could not be caught on camera. You'll also recall, of course, the disgust it engendered in everyone that the only proof of their existence was a physical aftermath. When one of them dissolved into a shapeless mass of bloody slime, being unable to exist outside of the crimson fog for more than a few minutes, someone had used the word "fiends" and it had stuck.

Of course we'd have been better off, in my opinion, to have gone along with the suggestion that we nuke the whole territory and turn the land and everything in it to ashes. But the scientists wanted to study the new landscape and, naturally, the Chinese and the Russians didn't want a cloud of radioactive ash drifting across their countries. Me? Knowing what I do now, I'd rather see a thousand mushroom clouds than that endless crimson fog.

In any case, it was agreed that a multinational force should "pacify any resistance" and then take control of the province so that it could be properly studied.

In the first phase of attack our forces had pushed deep into the territory, waves of helicopter gunships tearing immense chasms in the jungle, followed by the fire of artillery and foot-soldiers, driving back the fiends. And then, like all the previous endeavours, communications were lost and all our forces simply vanished. The unimaginably vast expanse of landmass that constituted Chang-Yi province, with its endless jungles from which rose titanic mountain peaks dotted with strange temples to the unknown gods of the fiends, had to be conquered or else there would be no end to the war. Eventually, we supposed, the enemy would pour forth from their strongholds after regrouping in ever greater numbers.

Only one man did not vanish altogether. Major Qersh alone had sent back his last transmission via shortwave radio from deep inside Chang-Yi province two weeks ago. He was trapped, completely surrounded by the fiends on all sides, but bravely holding them off in a ruined temple high upon a nameless mountain peak. He had the secret that could end the struggle. He alone knew how to gain victory over the entities of the crimson fog and even how to dissipate the fog itself. Some cynics said it was propaganda. But those who did so secretly hoped not, even as they said it.

- - -

Four of us had been chosen to undertake the rescue mission. Koszalski and Mayhew were the others. They were slightly older than I was, but I had seen more combat service. Lieutenant Yian-Ho was to be our guide. The Chinese was the only person who had been to the heart of occupied territory and returned alive.

There were a lot of peaceniks whose opinions grew loud in the media and said we should simply leave the enemy territory alone altogether. We had gained nothing from military action except the loss of good young men and the squandering of hundreds of millions of dollars in a conflict we could not win. After all, they said, the so-called “fiends” had never ventured beyond Chang-Yi province.

Yes, the things were disgusting, but why were they regarded as our enemies? The land they occupied was unpopulated and had been useless anyway. Why not just leave them alone and let them stew in their damn crimson fog? Better non-aggression than the continued futile loss of life on our side. This point of view rapidly gained huge popularity, its logic was impeccable, and, just when it seemed on the verge of becoming policy, a startling new fact emerged.

Since its initial appearance, the crimson fog had been expanding at the steady rate of just over a mile each day. It was slowly swallowing up all the land around it and creating more jungle, more dizzying mountains and more carnivorous fiends. Within two years, to the south, it would flow over the Great Wall of China, and in a further couple of months would totally engulf Beijing. And then, of course, someone calculated that, if the crimson fog continued to spread unchecked at its present rate, our entire planet would be transformed in a few decades.

Major Qersh became the hope of the world. And we had to get in and then get him out alive.

2

They dropped us six hundred and ninety miles inside the crimson fog, about another ten short of the foot of the nameless mountain. Not even the upper reaches of the mountain were, of course, clear of the fog, so a direct aerial approach was impossible.

It was nothing short of a miracle that we had made it this far inside Chang-Yi province. The six previous attempts had all crashed into mountain peaks obscured by the crimson fog. They had managed to radio back their last positions via shortwave radio, and intelligence had charted a revised safe route based on those six failed previous attempts. We all knew it was only a "safe route" if there wasn't another unknown peak between the one the sixth mission hit and our own target drop.

We bailed out, the four of us, into the billowing crimson mist at four thousand feet, and disappeared from one another's sight. I pulled my chute and drifted down to a jungle I couldn't even see until it rushed up towards my feet when I was nearly on top of it.

Mayhew got tangled in the branches and creepers of a tree forty feet up, but I managed to get him down safely. Koszalski had a touch of panic and worried he'd turned his ankle when he'd hit the ground, but he managed to walk it off pretty soon. It took the three of us several minutes to locate Yian-Ho, who had probably pulled his chute earlier than the rest of us. During that period when he was missing, I wondered if the mission was over before it had begun. Without Yian-Ho there was no way we'd have been able to cross ten miles of unmapped jungle inside a nightmarish fog with visibility down to ten yards and that made any compass direction as reliable as a mad dog chasing its own tail.

We hadn't gone more than a mile when Mayhew began to grumble about the effect the permanent fog was having on his eyes, like a red myopia. He was right, I knew, but it didn't do any good to voice the thought aloud.

"This voodoo shit," he said. "It's like there's blood inside my eyeballs."

I grunted and shot him a nasty look. We were none of us more than five feet apart, and we were moving forward together in a diamond shape. Yian-Ho was at point, Mayhew and Koszalski either side, and I was bringing up the rear.

The very existence of the crimson fog forced you to think about the big questions in life. Nothing like it had ever happened before.

From what I knew thus far, Koszalski was a Catholic nut, a bead rattler who also kept a little picture of the Virgin Mary in his wallet, rather than one of a wife, girlfriend, or even some fantasy squeeze. I suspected that bugged Mayhew even more than it did me, since Mayhew was one of those modern black guys who were spectacularly secular. With me—my dislike for religion I mean—it was misanthropy, plain and simple. Nothing profound, and I wouldn't apologise for it, not after what I'd seen and been through in the psych ward. My gut instinct was that my being born was a mistake. But Mayhew liked to read books of philosophy, and I suppose he thought men at their best were rational beings, not mystical idiots.

As for Yian-Ho, he was a complete mystery. Moreover, his English wasn't exactly great. I put him down as a Buddhist. Or something. Maybe he was Daoist.

Koszalski had a tendency to mutter prayers under his breath as he smoked. And he smoked a lot. I suppose it was a substitute for incense. He was painfully thin.

As we trekked through the jungle he started up again.

"Cut it out, Koszalski," Mayhew finally said. "Concentrate on the job at hand. Jesus ain't coming."

"Both of you keep it down," I whispered forcefully through my gritted teeth.

Yian-Ho turned back and nodded to emphasise my remark.

"Many fiends around here before," he said, almost inaudibly.

It was true that the fog muffled most sounds anyway and a fiend would have had to have been within twenty yards to hear any of our voices, short of someone screaming, but there was no point in wasting our breath talking.

Ten miles through this rough, nearly impenetrable terrain, took four or five times longer than covering the same distance across clear ground. The advance was exhausting and slow. At times we had to hack our way forward through walls of dank vegetation with our machetes, over hillocks and down hollows.

And the realisation was growing on us that we were bound to encounter one or more of the fiends eventually. We'd just been lucky so far, but it would be a chance in a million that we wouldn't do so before reaching the ruined temple where Major Qersh had holed up and surrounded.

When I was a kid, growing up during the 1970s, I used to read a lot of horror and science fiction. I graduated from comic books to paperbacks around the time I first entered my teens. And I want to say that what 99% of

that stuff tells you about supposed encounters with the unknown is a formulaic convention. No one faints like a chicken-shit or else reaches for their weapon like Arnie Schwarzenegger in the face of something so utterly terrifying there isn't even a name for it. What those writers don't know is what happens in an encounter with the outside is this: that the moment slows down to such an extent that time itself simply stands still in your head. I suppose that fact doesn't make for good characterisation. It's incommunicable. I think they call it the numinous.

I once did a semester in creative writing back after graduating, around the decade King was outselling every other author on the planet, but could never make the grade. Still, I read a lot of the best attempts. Maybe that's why someone like Lovecraft, or Machen, or one of the old-school writers of that stuff I used to read had almost pulled it off. They were no good at characterisation and tended to use ciphers, presenting the phenomenon itself as the main protagonist, because it was the way things are when you encounter it. The thing empties you, draining out any semblance of normalcy, no matter what your history is, or what you think you're all about. Real horror consists not of the worst thing in the world you can imagine happening, but in encountering some abomination you cannot possibly imagine, something even worse than fear: a shard of absolute outsideness. Human characters become shadows, just shadows.

I think Yian-Ho knew it, though he didn't let on. I never did find out what it was that made him come back into the crimson fog. Maybe he'd been drugged up to the eyeballs, maybe his family were being held hostage, but I do know this; no one sane would be dropped back in the middle of the crimson fog a second time unless he had no choice. No one who has ever been up close to a fiend in its native habitat would want to repeat the experience.

We were exhausted when it happened.

For four hours straight we had been hacking our way through the dense vegetation, crawling like bugs sometimes, inching our way up an incline. Our clothes and bodies were soaked with sweat, our limbs were like dead weights, and finally, when we reached the top, Koszalski just sat down and refused to go any further without five minutes rest. Neither I nor Mayhew were disposed to argue with him, so we dropped our machetes and pulled out water bottles and started chugging at them. Yian-Ho, however, was still on his feet. He was alternately looking down at us and scanning the impenetrable red gloom, as if he had X-ray vision.

“No stop now,” he said. “Better no stop now.”

I soon realised he wasn’t acting that way due to anything his eyes might have told him, but rather what his nose did. He must have caught a whiff of it long before any of the rest of us. And when that odour finally wafted into my nostrils, I, like Mayhew and Koszalski, got to my feet at once and we all had our rifles in our hands.

It was the stench of something atrociously *wrong*. I am not sure I can put it any other way. The actual smell was itself indescribable. It was not pungent at all, in fact it was rather subtle; but I am sure it bore no relation to anything in the history of the world, not animal, mineral, nor vegetable. But when that scent got inside your nostrils it made all the hairs on your neck feel as if they were standing on end, and your breath came in little gasps, just like the onset of a high fever—the first symptom of some horrendous infection.

We all felt it. We all looked back and forth at one another with the same expression in our eyes.

For five minutes nothing happened.

No one said a thing. We just watched and waited, guns ready.

The crimson fog drifted all around us, muffling everything.

I thought the unearthly odour had faded somewhat, but perhaps that was my imagination, or perhaps the first unendurable shock of it was already starting to wear off.

And then a twig snapped somewhere to my left. Under normal circumstances it would have been barely perceptible; but in the dead silence and with our heightened sense of dread, the sound was like a crack of thunder.

We emptied the chambers of our four AK-47 assault rifles into the depths of red gloom. The noise was deafening and bits and pieces of mutilated vegetation scattered into the air like wedding confetti. After three or four more bursts we ceased firing.

“See anything?” I said.

“Nothing,” Mayhew replied.

“Think we got the bastard?” Koszalski said.

The smell of cordite masked everything else.

We examined the spot we’d devastated. There was no body there. I don’t know if I was relieved or not. It was a toss-up between the relief at seeing one dead and not seeing one at all.

No one seemed quite certain of what to do next.

“We go now,” Yian-Ho said finally, taking the initiative. He reminded me of a seasoned dope fiend guiding college freshmen through their first bad acid trip.

3

Three hours later the sun went down. We pitched camp in a small clearing and built a fire. It could not possibly give away our position, of course, due to the omnipresent crimson fog. The wood we chopped from the trees did not burn easily, but we got a fire going eventually, though the flames coughed and spat in protest at their source. We cooked our rations and ate in silence.

The jungle was so quiet it was increasingly oppressive, now that we were surrounded by the darkness. Jungles are never quiet places, especially not at night. There was not even a breeze to rustle the tree tops. Nothing that moved of its own accord lived and breathed here, no insect, no bird, no animal of any kind, except for the fiends. Except for us.

Mayhew set up the shortwave radio. He relayed our status and position back to H.Q. and was advised that we were to make our first attempt to try and contact Major Qersh. Communications from him had ceased two weeks ago and no one knew if he was alive or dead, something we, of course, had been dropped into the middle of Chang-Yi province to ascertain—and then to extract (if he was alive) the secret to killing the fiends and dispersing the crimson fog. No one knew if Qersh was dead, if his transmitter was destroyed or damaged, or whether even shortwave was beginning to fail to penetrate the crimson fog as its diameter inexorably expanded. Mayhew was a stickler for protocol and, I thought, was being absurd in keeping up with the use of military code when it was unnecessary.

“Blue Tiger Leader, this is Orange Tiger Pick Up, due south of your position, come in please. Over.”

Nothing but ghostly static came back.

“Are you receiving me, Blue Tiger Leader? Over.”

More static.

“Come in, Blue Tiger Leader. Over.”

This one-sided exchange went on for around five minutes while the rest of us were sitting around staring dumbly and spooning the pork and beans into our mouths that we’d cooked directly in their cans in the embers at the edge of the fire.

When we finished the chow, Koszalski lit a cigarette and shook the pack in my direction. Even though I'd quit three months ago, I took one anyway. So did Yian-Ho. It's funny, I thought to myself, the prospect of an imminent death being a contributory cause of lung cancer.

Still no response from Qersh. And Mayhew must have been trying a good seven or eight minutes now. He looked about ready to give up and also finally to help himself to Koszalski's supply of Lucky Strikes, when some words burst through the static intermittently. They were difficult to make out.

"*... is Blue Tiger ... ome ... derful ... den. Radio ... for God's sa ... hurry ... ver*."

"Repeat last message, Blue Tiger Leader. Over."

More ghostly static. Mayhew kept up trying for an hour, but there was nothing more than what we'd already received coming back. He quit the fruitless task.

Sure enough those few words through the ether were all we heard. But it was Qersh all right. There was no one else it could have been.

I can't say our spirits were lifted. Mayhew relayed the information to H.Q. and they, of course, were enthused by this new development. We were to press on at dawn tomorrow to complete our mission objective.

We stared at one another around the campfire. It was our first time as a group with no immediate orders to carry out. We'd been thrown together only for this three-day mission and, truth be told, the chances of our carrying it out successfully were slim. We were a trial run for the real thing, expected to get to the mountain perhaps, but not to make it as far as Qersh. We'd been dropped in primarily to make sure he was still alive. Our job was to reconnoitre and if we got incredibly lucky, then it was all a bonus. But far more likely was that the next multinational team would piggyback on our efforts and take all the plaudits and glory.

"You know about Apollo 10, right?"

"Sure," Mayhew replied, "the mission before the actual moon landing. Full dress rehearsal."

"That abandoned lunar module must still be out there, somewhere in space, drifting in orbit around the sun."

"What are you talking about, Sloane?" Koszalski said.

"Nothing, forget it."

I think everyone, Koszalski included, knew what I was getting at. But Mayhew spelled it out anyway.

“Crew of Apollo 10 were told there wasn’t enough fuel for a landing. But there was. The tanks were all full. NASA lied out of their asses to them. Couldn’t take the chance the astronauts would flip and risk landing anyway,” Mayhew said.

“Not true story. In fact, Chinese were first on the moon, 1962,” Yian-Ho said, with a wry grin.

“Communists,” Koszalski said, “will believe anything.”

“So you believe in all that other stuff instead, hey, Koszalski? Heaven, hell, the whole Jesus fairy tale? And the Devil too?” I said.

“I don’t want a debate about it right now. For a start we won’t agree on basic definitions. Secondly, we won’t agree on the burden of proof. Thirdly __”

“Looks to me,” Meyhew cut in, “like hell is all around us now, looks to me like hell has come to stay. Ain’t no magic involved, only science this time. This is real.”

“Read some Aquinas,” Koszalski said, passing around his cigarettes.

“Maya. Illusion,” Yian-Ho murmured.

Maybe he was a Buddhist and a communist. You could couple Buddhism with anything. It wasn’t a judgemental deal. Atheism, Christianity, Shinto, even devil-worship. Nazism too, probably. Real tolerant.

We smoked and looked at one another blankly. But the moment didn’t last long. Any conversation was better than the gaunt silence of the fog. So we discussed movies, and sports, and women, and anything else that came into our heads until we ran out of small talk and finally needed some shut-eye. Strange how quickly men become stereotypical ciphers in the face of fear and the unknown. I suppose my misanthropy was kicking in again.

Yian-Ho took first watch, I was to take the second, Koszalski the third, and Mayhew the fourth. Whether the fiends were more active during the night I couldn’t say, although since some scientists claimed that the things never slept at all, unlike all other animals we know of, I suppose it was something of a moot point.

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Inside the confines of the tent Mayhew and Koszalski were both as restless as I was, despite our shared exhaustion, and we kept shifting position and muttering indistinctly. It was like a psych ward at night, when the effects of sedatives and painkillers are beginning to wane and the final drug trolley isn’t due for another hour. When I did finally manage to drop off, I slept badly, dreamlessly, and it seemed only moments later that Yian-Ho woke me

up for me to take my shift. I could tell he was eager to get back into the tent alongside the others, rather than being left all alone out there, and I accused him, falsely, of shaving off a good half hour from the duration of his turn at watch.

When I was outside I realised there are worse places than psych wards. The silence was the worst of it. The only faint background noise came from the crackling embers of the campfire. Tentacles of red mist crept across its dim, twelve-foot circle of light, and I occupied my time drinking acrid black coffee, poking at the low flames with a branch and tossing in more strips of wood to keep the fire alive.

There was no point in trying to spot something in the fog and darkness.

For all I knew there could have been a hundred of those evil fiends out there in a circle around me, staring blankly, their dreadful protoplasmic eyes and bodies bubbling with insane hunger, and I would have had no way of telling.

I tried to think about something else, *anything* else, because once a thought like that one got hold of you it was the beginning of the end.

I checked my wristwatch. It indicated I had been alone outside for twenty minutes. It seemed more like twenty hours. Then, stupidly, I was convinced the thing was broken and I held it up to my ear. I didn't want to hear the ticking of the mechanism, but there it was nevertheless. Had it stopped I would have had an excuse to go back inside the tent and rouse one of the others.

My mind wandered again. Creeping fear. Nice phrase. Or "The Creeping Fear." Must have been the title of one of those Lovecraft stories I read back on that useless creative writing course. A fat lot of good those classes ever did for anybody. I never managed to sell a thing, just wasted a lot of time and effort, and watched our big-shot teacher (whose one claim to fame was having sold a script to the final series of that syndicated TV show *The Dusk Domain* back in the 1960s) as he worked his phony charm on his female students one after the other. I bet he never suffered from the creeping fear, only the creeping STD itch.

But *The Dusk Domain*—now that was a good show. Old school. They don't make them like anymore. Nowadays it's all maggot-riddled zombies. Or serial killer neighbours. What was that great episode of *The Dusk Domain*, the one with a manic Leonard Nimoy on an airplane, and he's the only one who can see that the flight crew are all demons, or something, and the passengers' destination is hell? Or the other one about the radio that's

tuned into tomorrow, and the guy (must have been a young Dennis Hopper) who bought it from a junkshop and who makes a fortune at the racetrack until he hears nothing but static? And it turns out the next day the US and the Soviets went to war and both sides have dropped the bomb, wiping out the entire planet. Nothing but static. It was the noise of that static that was the sucker punch. Just like the static punctuating Qersh's indistinct words.

"*... is Blue Tiger ... ome ... derful ... den. Radio ... for God's sa ... hurry ... ver*."

Maybe Qersh had cracked up there all alone in the crimson fog. He was probably so crazy by now it was a waste of time trying to get to him. Twenty minutes—was it still only twenty minutes? Qersh had to be insane by now. No one could not be under such circumstances. All those fiends out there in the jungle, hiding away, and just staring in the darkness, in the fog, thousands of sunken eyes like currants in gingerbread men, staring and waiting for the right moment to strike, waiting in silence, waiting until a man has completely lost his mind, I bet there's something savoury about a meaty brain that's cooked in its own juices …

"Sloane? Sloane! Answer me!"

A voice. Someone was shaking my shoulder.

"Time for me to take over."

It was Koszalski. The bead-rattling Papist.

I checked my watch. My shift was finished. Somehow I'd lost track of time altogether.

"Hey," he said. "Are you OK? You were really out of it."

I didn't reply, I just went back into the tent and tried to get to sleep. Eventually I thought I heard Koszalski outside muttering words to himself over and over again. It sounded like the Lord's Prayer, but it could have been the Hail Mary, or maybe it was both mixed up. But even as I noticed it, I was losing consciousness.

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Mayhew woke me this time.

"Koszalski's gone," he said.

"What do you mean, 'gone'?" I replied. "Has he run off?"

I knew he wouldn't have run off, no one would willingly take his chances alone in the crimson fog, even in daylight, but I didn't want to frame the only alternative I could think of.

"You'd better see for yourself," Mayhew said.

We woke up Yian-Ho and went outside.

The fire was still burning, at a low ebb, and the electric lantern was doing most of the work in keeping the darkness back. A few things had been turned over in what looked like a brief, one-sided struggle. Koszalski's assault rifle, pack, and helmet were lying there like discarded mementoes.

"Look," Yian-Ho said, pointing to something else.

At a spot close to the edge of the fire there was an empty camouflage uniform and two boots in a crumpled heap. From the pile issued a trail of stomach-churning malodorous red slime or excreta, leading right off into the depths of the fog and the jungle. That fever smell was unmistakable and repugnant; it reeked of the fiends' presence. One of them had probably got Koszalski while he was gazing into the fire. It must have jumped him from behind and then fastened onto him, covering his mouth with its own so he could not scream and then drawing up all his flesh and blood and bone into itself, dissolving him silently, as a python does. And the damn fiend, all fat and loathsome, then excreted, leaving that sickening trail of human jam behind it.

So much for the efficacy of Koszalski's prayers. His rosary beads were right in the middle of the red trail of excreta—it seemed the thing didn't much care for the taste of them.

We kitted up, weapons ready, and followed the bloody trail for about five hundred yards into the gloom. It appeared to terminate at the base of a huge tree, but then we noticed that the trail actually continued vertically up the trunk and into the obscured branches high overhead. I thought of firing off a few rounds up into the distance, but there was no telling where the bullets might come down and we knew those fiends moved from tree to tree like monkeys anyway. The overwhelming probability was that it was long gone rather than staring down at us with a satisfied grin on its ugly face. There was no point in wasting ammo.

We made our way back to camp. No one felt like sleeping and the sun was up in less than an hour anyway.

"We need to bury him," I said.

Mayhew laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh, there was too much sarcasm in it.

"I'm serious," I said, gritting my teeth.

Yian-Ho didn't seem inclined to join in the debate and began cleaning his machete with a rag.

"Look," Mayhew said, "there's nothing of him left to bury. You want to waste energy on making a grave for a couple of boots and a stinking

uniform? Forget it."

"It's the right thing to do. I don't give a shit for his beliefs, but it's a mark of respect for him as a soldier. We have a duty."

"Forget that foolishness. You want to waste your own time, you go right ahead, Sloane, but count me out," he said.

"Fine, I'll do that."

I began to dig a shallow grave. Yian-Ho helped at some stage, but not with much enthusiasm. When it was finished I put Koszalski's clothes and boots into the hole, kept the pack of cigarettes I found, and then went and retrieved his rosary from the sticky red trail. I threw it on top of the heap and covered the whole mess with a layer of soil. I tried to remember the words of a prayer, any prayer, but couldn't manage it.

"So long," Yian-Ho finally said.

Mayhew had watched us working for a little while, but soon occupied himself with the radio and attempted to get through to H.Q. and report, I suppose, that we were now down to three men.

He couldn't get through.

There was only static this time. Louder than before.

We ate breakfast without saying a word. As the sun came up, the darkness all around us gave way to the crimson of the fog in daylight.

I would have given all I had for the sound of a dawn chorus.

4

We pressed on through the jungle in a line, Yian-Ho at point, me in the middle, and Mayhew bringing up the rear. The masses of vegetation that had slowed us down and forced us to hack our way through with machetes had thinned out, and there were now long stretches of clearing where our passage was relatively unhindered. I was amazed at Yian-Ho's navigational skill. It seemed to me incredible that he could accurately chart any sort of route to the base of the mountain. Our course was serpentine, not direct. There were not even any landmarks to give him his bearings. Perhaps he had one of those almost psychic senses of direction some rare people seem to possess, almost like a sixth sense.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but it seemed to me the stench of the fiends was more often close at hand than before. At first I thought it must have clung to me after I'd handled Koszalski's slime-covered apparel, but the smell was not constant; it came and went in degrees of intensity. And

after that business with the thing having left its bloody trail vertically up a tree, I spent as much time desperately squinting into the crimson gloom above my head as I did squinting into the vegetation on the ground. I imagined troupes of the things swinging from treetop to treetop, alongside the hordes of them creeping through the bushes alongside us.

I didn't voice the thought aloud, but a part of me wanted the fiends to come out into the open and attack us. It would mean an end to the unbearable suspense and the chance to take down some of them with our weapons. I wanted to know for sure they could be killed, that a hail of bullets could tear right through their stinking hides, and I wanted to hear one of them scream in agony as it died. What I couldn't stand was the idea of them appearing and disappearing into the crimson fog, picking us off one by one, as elusive and impervious to physical damage as phantoms.

We made good progress during the afternoon, after we'd stopped briefly to eat and to try to radio H.Q. We couldn't get through again. And, although we were closer to Qersh's position than before, when we had been partially successful, we couldn't establish contact with him either.

After several hours of extreme physical exertion coupled with a continued thinning out of the obstructive vegetation that had slowed us down before, we found ourselves steadily ascending new terrain.

"The foot of the mountain," said Yian-Ho as we pressed on with redoubled effort.

The ground became rocky and we gradually left the trees behind. It was a tremendous relief, because now I knew that the fiends had no cover for their activities. Although the crimson fog still hid them from direct sight, our line of fire would now be completely clear without any obstacles.

"Let's rest here for a short while and then set up camp for the night slightly further up," I said.

Yian-Ho paused, turned back, and the smile he had on his face froze.

"Where Mayhew?" he said.

There was a muffled sound of gunfire coming from about five hundred yards back along the route we'd taken. Only the firecracker racket of shots fired could penetrate across that distance. It was coming from right at the edge of the tree line. I don't know whether Mayhew had stopped to tie a bootlace, had turned his ankle, or what had caused him to fall behind, but it had occurred. Nevertheless, he was still alive, and he had the radio. We had to go back for him.

Yian-Ho and I retraced our steps in the fog with our guns blazing, and I think it was this that caused the enemy to retreat before it had finished entirely with Mayhew. Such had not been the case with Koszalski, where it had time to linger over its activity, slowly ingesting him and hauling itself off into the jungle.

We found Mayhew all right. Perhaps as much as half of him was left. The fiend or fiends (I had no idea how many it would take to do that to a fully grown man) had retreated into the combination of cordite smoke and red fog, leaving behind no trace of their presence save for the lingering alien stench.

Mayhew was spread-eagled like a puppet whose strings had been cut mid-performance. Two of his limbs, a whole arm and leg, were gone completely, dissolved, and so too with the torso and head, as if acid had been poured over his body. What remained twitched in spastic fashion, and from the corner of its ruined mouth there issued a steady drool of black liquid.

I think the remaining half of his face was the worst.

Mayhew was not a man likely to succumb to spiritual mayhem. Even in pain and impending death I imagined that cold logic and scientific reason would be his guiding lights. He was ever the Stoic. But the expression in that remaining half-face was like a vortex. Unfathomable, insane ecstasy stared out from its depths, not horror. The destruction of his physical form could not account for that aspect.

And he was murmuring—words he wanted to impart to me.

Yian-Ho aimed his weapon so as to put a bullet through Mayhew's brain before I had the chance to hear what he said. But I knocked aside the barrel of Yian-Ho's rifle, and his shot went wide.

I bent down over Mayhew's body to catch what he was saying.

"Go away," he said, "and let me alone. Let them come to me. To feed and be fed. Oh, there is such beauty in the enemy. Such beauty. If you only knew …"

I drew my sidearm from its holster, pressed the business end of the pistol to his temple, and squeezed the trigger before he could finish the sentence. The sharp recoil as it discharged reminded me of the last time I'd jerked off.

Blood and brains fountained onto the grass. More red and grey. Less green. Synaptic convolutions cooked in creeping fear.

"Come away now," Yian-Ho said, taking me by the arm. And so we started back up the slope taking the shortwave radio with us, leaving the tree line behind, and then … and then … well, there was just the two of us left in the crimson fog.

I thought of burying Mayhew. But it wouldn't have been a mark of respect.

5

We set up camp after about fifteen minutes of trekking up the side of the mountain, slightly further than I had originally intended to, but I wanted to put some distance between us and the spot where they'd got Mayhew. Most of the light had gone by the time we got a campfire going, using the branches Yian-Ho had thought to collect in his backpack before we had quit the forest. We cooked something in their cans, though I could scarcely tell what it was. Some kind of stew, I supposed. Even my sense of taste and smell seemed to be deadening, like my sense of sight, in the omnipresent crimson fog. After we'd eaten I took out Koszsolski's pack of cigarettes. There were only four left. I lit one and passed one to Yian-Ho.

I decided to ask him the question I'd been wanting to ask for a long time.

"What made you come back?" I said suddenly, without leading up to it.

He looked at me steadily as he puffed on his smoke and took so long before answering I thought he either hadn't heard me or didn't want to speak.

"Qersh," he finally replied.

So that was it. The old motto of never leaving a comrade behind. As simple as that. I hadn't realised they'd served together. Of course it made sense, but then …

"I came back to kill that sonofabitch," he added.

Then, over the course of half an hour, Lieutenant Yian-Ho told me what had happened before. The previous mission led by Major Qersh the group had consisted of six at the start. Somehow Qersh had got lost on the first day after their drop into the crimson fog. On the evening of the second day he wandered into camp and claimed to have caught up with and followed the company's trail. But the odd thing was that he had the unmistakable stench of the enemy on his skin and clothes. He reeked of it. This fact he attempted to explain away by claiming he'd had a close run-in with the enemy, fired at several of them, and was lucky to get away with his life.

Well, as the group halved in numbers over three nights, Yian-Ho had realised that it was always the man on last watch who disappeared in a trail of red slime. Qersh organised the rota and this confirmed, or so it seemed to Yian-Ho, that he was somehow in league with the enemy. Indeed, there had

been something not quite right about Qersh since he had returned, and it wasn't just the stench of him. Even if the matter of the order of the overnight watches was a coincidence, and the fiends preferred to strike just before dawn, sometimes Major Qersh looked at a man in a strangely sadistic way. Rather like the way, so Yian-Ho said, cats finally, gleefully, look at mice when they've got them trapped in a corner and they know the deadly game is almost over.

With only three men left now, Yian-Ho had tried to persuade the other Lieutenant, Li-Hung, that they had to kill their commanding officer or they were done for. It helped that the two were very old friends and had served together for the past five years. Both agreed that they would shoot Qersh while he slept, for he invariably took the second watch. He would know nothing about it and would scarcely suffer any pain. It would be a mercy.

That night, just after two in the morning, Yian-Ho crept into the tent and silently awoke Li-Hung, and after a moment or two both men trained their rifles on the recumbent form of Major Qersh in his sleeping bag.

At a signal from Yian-Ho both men would open fire at the same instant, so that the killing act would be shared equally.

Yian-Ho duly nodded to Li-Hung, and they both pulled their triggers.

Nothing happened except for dual clicks.

The ammunition cartridges had been emptied.

Slowly Qersh rolled over and sat up. There was a mirthless smile on his face.

At almost the same instant, as if on cue, the tent was torn apart and the stench of the fiends was everywhere as they bore down on the men.

Somehow, in the ensuing chaos, Yian-Ho managed to get away, plunging alone into the depths of the night, the fog, and the labyrinthine jungle, the screams of Li-Hung ringing in his ears and all the devils of hell in pursuit of him.

A week later he stumbled, bloodied, famished, and exhausted, into the fortified camp of the last scientific mission to be overrun just before its occupants had all been evacuated.

Yian-Ho finished his account and threw the butt of his cigarette into the flames of the campfire.

"This raises more questions than answers," I said.

"How so?" he replied.

"Why would our CO send you back in on a mission to rescue Qersh after you'd been debriefed and told him what you've told me?"

“I not tell him. I say I want to come back and help rescue great hero Major Qersh, hope of the world. But I keep secret he is sonofabitch.”

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There was no attack that night; and what with there now being only two of us to keep watch, neither Yian-Ho or I got enough sleep. I wondered if our being outside of the forest, as well as some way further down that part of the mountain where Qersh was supposedly encircled by hordes of the fiends, meant this area was relatively free of them. Certainly the stench appeared to be have receded.

Before we broke camp I tried the shortwave radio again but without success. It seemed a useless, heavy burden, and the thought crossed my mind to leave it behind here, but I dismissed the suggestion. Who knows what might have happened by now to Qersh’s own shortwave radio and whether it was still even functional?

Yian-Ho led the way up the rocky approach route towards the higher reaches of the mountain, and I was hard-pressed to keep up with him. His agility, balance, and sure-footedness in the ascent were far superior to my clumsy abilities.

We hadn’t said much since he had told me his tale about Major Qersh and, naturally, I had no way of knowing how much of it was true. I didn’t doubt that Yian-Ho had come back to kill Qersh, but whether or not events had transpired exactly as the lieutenant had related them to me I had no way of knowing. I didn’t doubt that I would only gain some measure of an insight into the truth if and when the two men came face-to-face. But, in any case, I knew I could not simply stand back and allow Yian-Ho to gun down Qersh in cold blood at first sight. My orders had been to rescue the man, not to stand back and allow Yian-Ho to destroy him.

There was also the question of my own safety to be considered. If Yian-Ho planned to assassinate Qersh he had put me in a position of either being forced to be an accomplice or else opposing his scheme and making me an obstacle.

I read in Yian-Ho’s eyes that he knew what I was thinking. And doubtless vice versa. I still wasn’t sure he was even sane. Nothing, not even revenge and loyalty to fallen comrades, could have made me travel into the crimson fog a second time.

As we climbed the ascent became ever more perilous, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he was choosing the most difficult path upwards. I lost my footing several times and once or twice even came close to taking a fall of—

I imagined—several hundred feet. It would not have been so damnable were it not for the crimson fog. I could neither tell how far we had come nor how far there was to go. For all my senses told me we could have been climbing a mountain that had no beginning or end but stretched from one side of infinity to the other.

While I brooded over these thoughts, my eyes peering desperately at the ground a few feet in front for suitable footholds, I hadn't noticed that Yian-Ho had stopped ahead of me and turned around, waiting until I was less than a few yards behind him and it was too late for me to react.

He had drawn his pistol and was pointing it at my chest. His expression was deadly serious. There wasn't anything like fear or anger mixed in with it, just a steely determination. Normally, of course, in such situations one's focus tends to be on the firearm that threatens to blank out one's earthly existence with a loud bang. But I had expected something like this. I had been at the wrong end of a gun before, and I knew the routine.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant," I said, raising my arms without being asked to do. "We're on the same side, remember. There's no need for this."

The sound of my voice comforted me. If he'd intended to gun me down without listening to what I had to say I'd already be riddled with bullets.

"I can't take the chance," Yian-Ho said. "You try to stop me when I get to Qersh."

"So you're going to kill me, is that it? Just as Qersh did to your friend Li-Hung and the others?"

"No. I give you a choice. Either let me do what I must do or go back now, the way we came. I let you decide. This you must swear."

"All right," I said.

"Throw down your weapons," he ordered.

I complied with machete, rifle, pistol, and even the jackknife I kept hidden in my boot. He kicked them all off the path and they fell into the tentacles of red mist, all except for the pistol, which he had stowed in his pack.

"You take the lead now," he said, waving me past him. "Sorry for any inconvenience."

His sense of decorum rather touched me.

"I don't know the route."

"One route only possible. Straight up, please."

It was worse being at the front. As I've said, I'm no climber and my sense of balance and agility aren't exceptional. Our progress was even slower than before with me leading the way. I couldn't see any further than ten yards ahead of me; but at least when I'd been at the rear, gazing at Yian-Ho's back and following his lead, the fact didn't seem as dangerous. He was taking most of the risk. Now I was, and it had more than doubled now, and for both of us. I heard him swear a few times, in Mandarin, cursing my ineptitude after I stumbled—or staggered—and he would then almost be on top of me.

Of course the other danger, for me at least, was that I now didn't have a weapon to defend myself. If one or more of those fiends decided to lope suddenly out of the fog ahead and take hold of me I'd have to rely on Yian-Ho to get me out of trouble. And he'd have to shoot through me in order to hit the enemy. Either way I'd have had it.

How far does reality extend? That was the question that kept running through my mind.

Here I was trapped up on the side of a mountain in some crimson fog that reached all the way up into outer space before dissipating, with no scientific explanation to account for its properties.

How far does reality extend? Only to the limits of our senses? Or the limits of thought and the imagination? Beyond it is the vast unknown. You open the creaking door and enter *The Dusk Domain* …

I'd read something once about supposed boundary conditions as the universe expands, and it turned out there was no real edge, only a limit to our observational ability. In fact, anywhere in the universe is the centre of the Big Bang event. The far side of the universe is billions of years in the past only by virtue of its being on the far side from our own perspective.

I don't know about that—I'm no mystic or astrophysicist—but what I did know was Major J. Qersh was at the centre of this particular foggy red cosmos. Maybe he had all the answers about the phenomenon, as he claimed to have, or maybe he was just a mad "sonofabitch" as Yian-Ho thought, or maybe—just maybe—it didn't matter a damn either way and all reality was finally tearing itself apart at the seams as the cosmos expanded.

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The stench was back. The fiends couldn't be far away now. The smell had been getting stronger for the last half hour. At first I caught a vague impression of it, but as we ascended there could be no doubt. We were climbing up into another area where they swarmed, invisible, like flies in fog.

Yian-Ho must have noticed it too, but he didn't comment on it. We hadn't said a word to each other since he'd taken control of the situation. He must have realised how defenceless I was and I expected him, sooner rather than later, at least to offer me back the use of my pistol for my own protection. My reserve reached the breaking point. I knew it would be better to wait for him to make the offer, but I could no longer go on pressing into the depths of the fog ahead without a weapon. It was suicide. I was right on the verge of turning around in protest and making my plea when I heard muffled shots behind me. A bullet whistled past my left ear with a sickening whine like a mosquito and I instinctively dropped to the ground, rolling onto my side and looking back.

How far the bullet had travelled I could not tell.

Yian-Ho was nowhere to be seen.

I wondered whether he had screamed at the last when he was taken and if the fiends and the fog had blotted out the sound entirely.

At least, I thought, they would be occupied with him for some time. The fool should have given me the pistol back. There was no way I could tackle those fiends with my bare hands.

And so there was nothing else for me to do except to go on.

7

I reached the outer part of the ruined temple half an hour before dusk. The path upwards became flights of steps carved into the rock until finally they terminated and I found myself traversing the flagstones of a courtyard. The structure was not level and was tilted over at about ten degrees or so. I almost felt drunk as I made my way across it. Broken columns and a profusion of deep wells dotted the surface. I was terrified that I might stumble into one inadvertently, and when I paused to look down inside I heard something silent throwing itself around in the darkness down there, and an all-too-familiar stench wafted up from the inky depths.

Eventually, after inching my way forward with the utmost care, for dusk gave way to night quickly, and with only my flashlight to pick out the wells that lay ahead in my path, I reached the inner temple.

A flight of crumbling steps, hollowed by the tread of centuries of feet, led up to a pair of rotten wooden doors that were ajar. I passed through them and entered into the interior of the structure.

For the first time since I had been dropped into Chang-Yi province I could see further than ten yards. The crimson fog did not penetrate into the confines of the temple, and my eyes took time to adjust both to seeing objects in the middle distance again and to the illumination within.

Thousands of candles burned inside, and my gaze was drawn up towards the lofty dome above my head by the array of hangings that fluttered in the warm air. These hangings all bore cryptic designs, ciphers I can only describe as curiously horrible mandalas. There was something vertiginous in their aspect and something fascinating too. It was difficult to tear one's gaze from them.

When I did so I saw ahead of me what must have once been the altar. Situated there was a couch fashioned from branches and vegetation, and there was a figure dressed in khaki reclining on it. As I approached, the figure got to his feet, and I had my first good look at Major J. Qersh.

He was a heavy-set man in his early fifties, just under middle height, balding, wearing horn-rimmed eyeglasses with a salt-and-pepper goatee and unchecked stubble elsewhere on his jaw. He was smiling, but the smile seemed artificial, as if he were putting it on only for my benefit. His left hand hovered over the pistol holster on his hip while in his right he held a long-stemmed pipe he had lately been smoking.

I should have saluted him, but somehow the gesture seemed absurd.

"You're Major Qersh," I said.

"That's what they called me, I reckon," he replied in an accent marking him out as someone from the Deep South.

When I was within a few feet I saw the dead expression in his ink-black irises. His eyes were utterly vacant and seemed to stare without any rationality lurking behind them. They gave his whole visage a disconcerting, masklike aspect. The odd smile he wore seemed frozen on his features as if, having once adopted that expression, he had forgotten how to easily replace it with another.

"You're the rescue party, I take it," he said, sliding back onto the couch, his left hand drifting away from his holster and occupying itself with finding a lighter that he used to relight the contents in the bowl of his pipe.

"What's left of it," I said. "I'm Captain Thomas Sloane."

"And how, uh, exactly do you propose to get me out of here? Doesn't look exactly like a well-organised mission."

"We were sent in to bring you back to the position where we were dropped off. They're probably already levelling the forest there so they can

land a chopper."

"I'm not going anywhere, son. I like it here."

Qersh was drawing heavily on the pipe, sucking some foul-smelling smoke—the colour of the fog outside—into his lungs and slowly expelling it with a sickening rasping noise. I watched it eddy and whirl in tentacles around his head before drifting upwards in the air.

"But your last transmission … it seemed to indicate you were under attack and needed to be evacuated."

"Things aren't always what they seem."

I wondered if Qersh hadn't made his broadcast simply in order to lure others to their deaths in the crimson fog. I wanted to make the accusation, but I knew I had to play the situation carefully. He was armed and I was not, and all the cards were stacked in his favour. Right now, all he seemed to want was an audience to watch him perform.

"Those things in the fog aren't monsters, you know," he said in that drawl of his. "We could learn a lot from them. I have learnt much from them already."

"Those *things* have killed the rest of the men who came to rescue you. They're not human."

"You know so little. They only came here to trade. Our world for their superior wisdom. Our flesh for their secret glory. They exchange all their thoughts with one another, sharing everything. Each one is part of a greater whole. Absolute equality. We can become a part of that whole, either willingly or unwillingly. Don't you want to be part of something greater than yourself? Something real, something physical, something that will last for generation after generation and not some absurd ideal?"

The man was insane. I realised I should have listened to Yian-Ho all along. And now it was too late. It seemed obvious that once Qersh was tired of me he would put a bullet through my head and feed me to the fiends. As if reading my mind, and in answer to my thoughts, he spoke again.

"They consume one another too, you know. Not very often, but it's the way they reproduce. It's their sexual cycle. For each one that's eaten they eventually excrete the nuclei of two more—newborns of red slime. They want to interbreed with us—with humanity, I mean. We must not fear the Other. We must become one with it. They are so much more tolerant than the human race, so much more open-minded. What do we have to lose?"

"Only that which makes us human."

“What makes us human? You think our miserable species worth saving? Mankind, the scum of the universe. Mankind, the bad joke. Mankind, his own worst enemy.”

He grinned, his dead eyes, magnified by the lenses of his spectacles, hanging over his smile like those of some enormous, hungry shark.

“And these things,” I said, “these cannibal fiends, what are they and where do they come from? What makes them better than—as you put it—human scum?”

My voice had taken on an accusatory tone. I felt, in that strange temple high in the crimson fog, that I had taken on the role of defending counsel for my species. I knew I was going to die here, and I wanted the scene to be played out with my having at least registered my contempt for Qersh and his betrayal of his fellow man.

“Since you ask,” he said, “and have come all this way into the new order in search of answers, I had better tell you. That first night when I was amongst them, when they gladly welcomed me, I participated in their secret rites of consummation.”

“You mean you copulated with the fiends and then fed them your comrades.”

“In the end,” he said, “my former comrades welcomed their destiny. As will you.”

I thought of Mayhew and his final words.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I said.

“Haven’t you realised? These things are not fiends. They are the final stage of human evolution. They haven’t arrived from some other planet or dimension. There are no aliens anywhere. We are all the sentient life there is in this useless void. They are the gods we are to become. And now, inevitably, the future has caught up with the past. They’re what we’ve been working towards as a species, what we’ve always been working towards. They have come to invade their own history.”

And thoughts I had thought before, not long ago, came back to me. Reality tearing itself apart at the seams as the cosmos expands. What lies beyond the edge of the visible universe cannot be known. The distance is greater than what light itself, or any other form of radiation, can reveal. The crimson fog—existence itself is bleeding to death.

Qersh had set aside his pipe on the couch and rose to his feet.

The final reckoning was at hand.

I somehow knew it lay within Qersh's power to call forth hordes of the fiends, from the pits littered around the temple, from the jungle, from the endless clouds of the crimson fog, and that they would fall upon me at his bidding, and all that I thought constituted my notions of humanity would cease.

"Sonofabitch!"

It was the voice of Yian-Ho. He had crept into the temple while Qersh and I were speaking and had only revealed himself at the last moment, waiting for his opportunity to strike.

His cry was followed by several rifle shots. As I rolled onto my side, I saw Qersh collapse under the impact of the bullets fired. His expression did not alter one iota as the lead tore into his body, staining his khaki with red blotches, and even as he fell, like some marionette whose strings have been severed, those dead eyes continued to stare vacantly.

Yian-Ho and I got out of there as quickly as we could.

8

We didn't encounter a single fiend on our way back to the pick-up point. Perhaps most of those in the vicinity had accumulated at the temple in order to pay their respects to the fallen Qersh and were preoccupied.

Of course it was much easier going back, retracing our route down the mountain and across the jungle, following the paths we'd hewn through the dense vegetation, and we made good time.

I asked Yian-Ho how he had escaped their clutches, but he told me he had simply been lucky and that the fog could be a help as well as a hindrance.

By the time we were close to the pick-up point I had a horrible sense of foreboding that the jungle wouldn't have been cleared with aerial firepower and the chopper would not be there to pick us up. But some little time before we reached the rendezvous area I caught the aroma of burnt vegetation filtering through the fog, and my hopes were raised. At least I was sure the first part of attempt to pick us up had been made, even if we did not yet know if the helicopter had successfully landed and was awaiting our arrival. The fires raised by incendiaries wouldn't burn for very long. Most of the vegetation was too pulpy, and the air too thick and damp with the fog, for total conflagration.

During the confusion back at the temple I had left behind the portable shortwave radio, and we had no way of communicating ahead to the

chopper, to headquarters, or to anyone else. The suspense was terrible. Yian-Ho and I had exhausted all conversation long ago and we had exchanged no words since he had passed my pistol back to me after we had fled the temple.

Finally we reached our destination and found scorched earth and blackened dead trees. The noise of huge blades slowly slicing through the air, churning up the fog like a maelstrom, prefigured the sight of the chopper itself.

Our relief turned to fear when we discovered no sign of the crew and saw three trails of red slime leading out of its interior. The rescue team could only have been taken within the last hour or so, perhaps immediately after landing. Blasting the forest must have drawn dozens of the fiends to wait for the flames to die out and, even now, it was likely they were consuming the air-force men.

I could fly the chopper sure enough, but my first concern was about fuel. The gauge showed the tank two-thirds full, so we had enough for a few hours' flying time. Enough to carry us several hundred miles and just clear of Chang-Yi province.

I did a quick, very basic instrument test and then Yian-Ho and I buckled up, the blades increased speed, and we hurtled straight up. I waited until we reached a reasonably safe altitude, to overfly any mountains, before heading in the direction of the eastern edge of the crimson fog.

9

When I tried the chopper's radio all I heard through the headset were bursts of static. Sometimes I thought I heard ghostly voices like Raudive phenomena, and I don't know whether it was my imagination or not but one of them that came through was eerily familiar:

"*... is Blue Tiger ... ome ... derful ... den. Radio ... for God's sa ... hurry ... ver.*"

I didn't mention it to Yian-Ho.

We have been in the air for more than three hours now and there is no end to the crimson fog. I haven't altered course, and we have been following the same dead east heading. I believe that the fog has suddenly expanded exponentially, has crossed the Chinese border, flowing over the Great Wall, and transformed all it encounters into alien, occupied territory.

Yian-Ho started to look at me suspiciously an hour into the flight and three times now has accused me of deliberately flying around in circles. He

doesn’t know what he’s talking about and has become dangerously unhinged.

Once, I’m sure, I heard him mutter under his breath the word “sonofabitch.”

He knows, now that I have my pistol back, he needs to think twice about making a hasty move, but he’s just crazy enough to try it. Even though it would mean both our deaths.

I figured out that his shooting Qersh could be a way of setting himself up as the new go-between between mankind and the fiends.

And Qersh said they can get inside your brain, sharing thoughts, making you think the strange things they want you to think.

Yian-Ho’s under their spell all right.

More than that, even, there’s something dead and Qersh-like about his gaze now.

I think his eyes must be full of either blood or fog.

There’s thunder rolling in from far off in the distance.

I calculate, from the gauge, there are fifteen minutes of fuel to go before the chopper’s tanks are empty.

Another ten minutes and, if he keeps on staring at me, I’m going to put a bullet through his occupied red brain.

Then I’ll try to set the chopper down.

How far does reality itself extend?

Nowhere near as far as what’s going to replace it.

MISANTHROPE

Ray Garton

I regain consciousness slowly, and with consciousness comes intense pain. It seems to be everywhere, as if I'm submerged in it, but as I become more alert, I realize it's coming from my left arm and right leg. Before opening my eyes, I listen, but all I hear is the thin spattering of rain against glass. And then: "Dr. Klein to pathology. Dr. Klein to pathology."

I am in a hospital, which is not surprising given my level of pain. But I don't know why I am here.

Gray daylight from the window floods the room. My last memory was of night, and I wonder how long I've been here.

There is a commotion around me, a sudden rush of movement, and I lift my head to look around. The room's door stands open and a stout blonde nurse is hurrying across the room to the window. She is followed by two more nurses who join her. I hear gasps and urgent whispers, but I'm in too much pain to care.

Everything comes back slowly as a name is quietly repeated in my head: *Zachary Wheeler …*

- - -

Zach was a regular in the store and always spent some time in the video booths in back. Some nights he was very talkative, and other nights I only glimpsed him coming in or going out like a silent, squinting ghost. He was pleasant enough, but an odd guy. Some might even call him "weird." No one would disagree. Not even Zach.

I worked the graveyard shift at Millennium Adult Books, one of the last sex shops in this city not yet strangled to death by the availability of porn on the Internet and tightening anti-porn laws. After the city's red light district was cleaned up by a born-again mayor, the store had been hidden away on a side street behind a storage rental facility.

My shift suffered no shortage of odd guys in the store—they crawled out of the masonry at night—but they were always odd in all the expected ways and I was always happy to see them go. Zach, at least, was interesting. He came off a little creepy and had some pretty bizarre interests, but I've

always gotten along well with weird people because, the way I see it, we're all weird in one way or another. Nothing about Zachary Wheeler suggested that he would so much as *consider* doing the horrible things he did.

After working graveyard in the store for fourteen months, I was accustomed to the drunks and junkies who shuffled in to get off the city streets, especially during the winter months. Since I'd started, three customers had overdosed in the video booths on my shift, and one old drunk had dropped dead of a heart attack, pants down and dick in hand.

Zach never smelled of booze and he didn't seem to be under the influence of any drugs. There always seemed to be a lot going on behind his eyes and it kept him preoccupied. He was a small, wiry guy who always seemed to be lost in his own clothes. He seemed lost, period, especially the first time he wandered into the store.

It was a rainy night—just as it would be the final, fatal time he walked into the store. Early January, the start of a new year. The city's occupants had retreated back into the brooding gloom from which they briefly and reluctantly emerged during the months of artificial good will and revelry that made up the holiday season. All that remained were a few limp decorations, somehow drained of color, that had not been removed from some windows and doors.

Zach stepped into the store shortly before one in the morning wearing an olive drab duffle coat that fell past his knees, his head swallowed by its hood. He stood just inside the door for a while and slowly turned his head from left to right, taking in the whole store. He even lowered his head and studied the ugly blue carpet. I watched as he slowly came forward, still looking all around until he turned to me, standing behind the register. I gave him a smile as he approached. He looked like he was walking in his sleep.

"Hello there," he said in a thin voice. He peeled the hood back to reveal a narrow, pale face below a halo of long, wildly mussed white hair shot with some remaining threads of black. "Could you tell me how long this store has been here?"

I shrugged. "I've only been working here for a couple of weeks. I couldn't tell you. Sorry."

He lifted a reassuring hand. "Oh, no need to apologize, that's perfectly all right."

"You thinking of buying the place?"

“Me? Oh, goodness, no. I’m just interested in … well, the history of the neighborhood, you might say.”

“First time here?”

“Yes. My name is Zachary Wheeler, but everyone calls me Zach.”

“Rick Bruno.”

“Actually, this is my first time in any … place … like this.” He continued to look around with intense curiosity. Then his head jerked back in my direction and he quickly added, “Uh, no offense to you, of course.” A quick smile, then he pointed at the doorway with the black curtain hanging in it and said, “What’s back there?” He squinted at the sign that read VIDEO BOOTHS (TOKENS REQUIRED).

“You don’t know what video booths are?”

“I’m afraid not. As I said, I’ve never been in a store like this before.”

It was hard to estimate his age. His face was lined, eyes sharp but bloodshot. His jaw sparkled with white stubble, and his sagging skin was dry and flaky in patches, but I couldn’t tell if that was all due to age or poor health.

“It’s a bunch of private booths,” I said. “Each booth has a video screen and about fifty channels of porn flicks. You keep the videos going with tokens that you buy out here.”

He frowned as he nodded, then reached under his coat and removed a small piece of paper, studied it a moment, looked around the store again, then replaced the paper under his coat. “It’s private, you say?”

I nodded.

“Like a … a phone booth?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember phone booths. Yeah, kind of like that.”

He reached under his coat again. “Well, then, I suppose I should buy some tokens because that’s where I have to go.” He produced a wallet and opened it.

“That’s where … what?”

“Oh.” He chuckled nervously. “Nothing. How much?”

He bought a bunch of tokens, then made an attempt to smile, but he was already someplace else in his head and had his mind on weightier things as he disappeared beyond the black curtain.

Part of my job at the store, of course, was to clean out the video booths. Once every shift, I had to sheathe my arms in heavy rubber gloves that went all the way up to my shoulders, spray the walls of each booth with

ammonia, scrub them, and mop the floor. It was not my favorite part of the job, but I suppose there are worse things one could do for money. There are *always* worse things, I always say.

I had to keep an eye on the security monitors at the register, too, and watch for signs of guys getting it on with each other in the booths. This was both prohibited *and* one of the reasons the booths existed. That makes no sense, of course, but these days, if you manage to stumble across something that makes sense, you'd better take it home and lock it away.

I found it sad at first. I felt kind of bad about breaking guys up and sometimes kicking them out. I figured they were lonely, desperate for some kind of human contact. But it was a big city, and there were any number of gay bars and gay bathhouses and probably all kinds of sex clubs where they could get all the human contact they wanted in a more comfortable setting, if that was what they were looking for. But it wasn't. Some just preferred those dark, smelly booths. Simple as that. Maybe the bus station restrooms were full, I don't know.

Human sexuality is a dark, damp forest filled with delights and horrors. Bring a good flashlight and wear your galoshes.

I remember being a little disappointed in Zach that first night when he bought tokens and went into the back. I'm not sure why. Maybe he seemed more intelligent than most, not the type to stand in a dark, semen-splattered booth and beat off. I don't know. I remember thinking, *Another one. Not so odd after all*.

Later in that shift, though, it started to bother me. He hadn't known what "video booths" meant, and when I explained, he didn't seem to care. And what had he said when he bought the tokens?

… that's where I have to go.

He'd seemed uninterested in porn videos and appeared to have some other reason for going back there. But that was ridiculous because … what else could he do? There was nothing else back there. When I checked the monitor, I didn't see him, so he was in one of the booths, and there wasn't much to do in the booths but watch porn and jerk off. I assumed that was what he was doing. He wasn't back there long and gave me a nod on his way out.

Later that shift, I donned my arm-length gloves, got my ammonia spray, mop, and bucket, and went into the back to start cleaning. I found

something unusual in the third booth on the left. Not just unusual—it was damned weird.

Someone had written on the black walls in what looked like chalk. The writing made no sense to me but looked vaguely familiar. It reminded me of the runes in a role-playing game I used to play in high school, but mixed with something that vaguely resembled Egyptian hieroglyphics. And there was something else thrown in, odd scribblings that might have been Farsi. But I didn't know any foreign languages and was only guessing. The rows of white scrawls on the two black walls flanking the video screen certainly were more interesting than the usual drying ejaculate, but why the hell would anyone do such a thing?

I did not connect the strange writing with Zach at the time and wouldn't for a while. I simply washed it all away.

Zach came in two or three times a week, and sometimes we chatted when he bought tokens. I learned that he was a retired history professor with no family. He'd moved to the city only a few weeks ago and knew no one. He said he'd talked more with me than with any one person since he'd arrived.

"But that's the way I like it," he said. "It's been my experience that the results of getting involved with people range anywhere from bitter disappointment to life-threatening danger. An unpleasant spectrum. I prefer not to clutter my life with them. Oh, uh, no offense to you, of course. But then, I only see you here and nowhere else. Just as I see the grocer only when I go to the grocery store, or my landlord only when I pay the rent. That's more than enough. Besides, even if I wanted people in my life, I have no time for them. There's far too much work to be done."

When I asked him what kind of work he was doing, he became evasive and changed the subject. That only teased my curiosity, of course, but I couldn't pin him down. The most I could gather was that he was researching a book of some kind.

"A book you're writing, or are you doing the research for someone else?" I said.

"What? Oh, um … yes."

That was Zach—distant, preoccupied, sometimes not sure what we were talking about. I often wondered what was going on behind the deep creases in his high forehead.

When I had to scrub the writing off the walls of the third booth on the left for the third time, it occurred to me—it happened only on nights when Zach

was in the store. It did not happen every time he came into the store, but always on nights when he was there. I watched him closely on the security cameras the next time he passed through the curtain into the dark corridor of booths. Sure enough, he went into the third booth on the left. But I found no writing on the walls later. It wasn't until his next visit that he used his chalk again.

The next time he came in, I wouldn't sell him tokens until he explained.

He frowned and withdrew into thought for a moment, then seemed to come to a conclusion. "I will explain if you like. But I can't do it here. Can we meet for coffee when you get off work?"

I still refused to sell him tokens. "If I have to clean your graffiti off the walls, I want to know what it means."

"I apologize for the mess."

"It's not a big deal. I have to scrub those walls, anyway. I just want to know—"

"I can pay you. Very well. I'm quite wealthy. *And* quite miserly, so you know this is important to me if I'm willing to part with money, and I am."

"Look, you don't have to pay me. I just want to know what the hell you're doing in there. Most guys just jerk off, you draw weird stuff on the walls. The hell's up with that?"

"I'll explain later. Over coffee."

It wasn't like I had other plans. I never had other plans. Let me put it this way: If you find yourself working in a sex shop, take it as a message from your life that somehow, at some point, you fucked up in a spectacular way. I never had other plans because I really didn't have much of a life. I was never very good at it, and after a lot of failure, I got tired and stopped trying.

I met Zach in a greasy little hole-in-the-wall diner a couple of blocks from the store. We had chili and coffee and he quizzed me.

"How old are you, Rick?" he said.

"Thirty-five."

"Religion?"

"No, thank you."

"Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Spouse?"

I shook my head. "I was married for a little while, but my wife … it didn't work out. I haven't tried again since."

"What do you believe in, Rick? What do you live for?"

I thought about that for a while and found that I was not sure. Until that moment, it was not something to which I'd given a lot of thought. Zach didn't rush me. He waited patiently until I said, "I guess I live for that morning when I wake up and finally decide to crawl out of this hole I'm in. But that, uh … that hasn't happened yet."

"Do you believe that this is all there is? That we live this life and then die and there is nothing more beyond this world?"

I shrugged. "I've never ruled out the possibility that there's more beyond this world. But so far, nobody's convinced me."

Zach nodded slowly, ate some chili, sipped some coffee. "If you have no other plans when we're done eating, come with me to my house. I have things to show you."

"Sure, I can do that. What about you, Zach? You're new in town. Where are you from? What kind of family do you come from?"

He finished his chili, set the bowl aside, and sipped coffee, holding the cup between both hands. "I come from a small Midwestern town you've never heard of. My father owned a company that manufactures packaged pastries. Pastries you probably have eaten. The company is still in operation and quite successful. He was also a sadist who took great delight in inflicting pain and torment and fear. I think that was the primary reason he had children. We were his toys. He beat one of my sisters to death right in front of me on Christmas Eve when I was just a little boy. It was all dismissed as accidental, and everyone expressed their sympathies for our loss. Nobody but my mother, my other two sisters, one of whom killed herself two years later, and I knew what really happened because we were in the room at the time. And I've ever told anyone about it other than my late wife."

When he paused for another sip of his coffee, I felt myself slump in the booth under the weight of what he'd said.

"My father was a very religious man who maintained two religious identities—his Christian identity for appearances, and his real religious identity which he shared only with his fellow worshippers. They worship an ancient Ammonite god called Moloch. But one name is never enough for a god, so he has many. You'd be surprised how many people at that level of business and power—entire families going back many generations—are members of this cult. Not just in this country, but in Europe, the Middle East, all over the world. But in absolute secrecy, of course. They all go to

their churches and synagogues every week. They have their Christian and Jewish weddings and their baptisms and bar mitzvahs, but that's just for show, a performance to maintain a long-crafted image. In reality, they all hold belief in and allegiance to their secret true religion. I grew up in it but left early on. If they knew I was telling you any of this, they would kill us both. But I digress."

I didn't doubt anything he'd told me up to that point, but I didn't exactly believe it, either. He was drifting rather far afield with the story of his father's religion.

"I tell you that," he said, "only to explain my interest in ancient religions. My family's cult goes back millennia, and as a boy I became interested in other religions from the same period, many of which could exist only in secret, and some of which still exist in secret today. My father's many connections gave me access to ancient texts and secret historical information not available to the general public. My studies and explorations yielded a discovery—another ancient religion hidden from history. It goes back farther than my father's cult. Long forgotten, unknown to most. My interest remained a hobby as I taught and wrote, but I nurtured those connections. I met a young woman, fell in love, had a beautiful daughter. My hobby was forgotten for a while because I was too much in love with my wife and daughter to pursue it. They were the only real peace and happiness I'd ever known. But …"

Another sip of coffee, then a long gaze into the cup.

"… they were shot to death by a madman who opened fire in a department store. I decided to retire early and live on my inheritance as my hobby became my life. Those connections gave me access to archaeological digs, new discoveries that were not being made public."

Zach finished his coffee, scooted out of the booth, and stood.

"Ready to go, Rick?"

After listening to his story, I felt exhausted, but I got to my feet.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's not far."

It wasn't close, either. It was a healthy walk through a bad part of town on a cold morning. He led me into a dreary residential neighborhood of run-down houses with overgrown yards. A lot of ivy crawled over red brick, and a lot of weeds grew high where once there were lawns. Willows wept up and down the street like mourners at a funeral.

Zach's yard was no different from the rest. A broken path cut through it to the steps that led up onto a gloomy covered porch. It all looked perfectly normal, if bleak and decayed, until I passed through the front door. Then I left this world behind.

Inside, everywhere I looked, all I saw was more of the writing I'd scrubbed off the video booth walls. They were on old Xeroxes, torn-out notebook pages, written in stone in enlarged photographs. They were tacked to the walls in neat rows, arranged in some order that only Zach understood. I could find no wall space not occupied by them except for a strip of about a foot just below the ceiling. I could see where cupboards and wall hangings had been removed to make room for them. They were everywhere.

"That looks familiar," I said, pointing to the photograph of the stone tablet.

"Yes, it would. Some of it, anyway."

"What is it?"

"That is what I've spent much of my life trying to find out."

"Where do they come from?"

As he spoke, he led me slowly through the house, from room to room, touring ancient writings. "Those stone tablets were found in an underwater cave in the Persian Gulf. Those in the picture over there come from South America. Others are from India, Ireland, the Antarctic. All in different languages. Dead languages. Not only dead but completely forgotten and unrecorded. Unknown. But if I am correct, and I think I am, they're all saying the same things. They are sacred texts of a sort, each outlining a ritual of worship and sacrifice."

Something told me not to ask the next question, but I did, anyway. "Ritual? What kind of ritual?"

"A summoning ritual to call forth the gods being worshipped. In each of these languages, the gods have different names, but they are the same. Cultures kept separate by geography and the limitations of travel, ancient, long-dead cultures that never had any communication with each other … worshipped the same gods."

"You said it was a ritual of sacrifice."

"Yes. Always sacrifice. That's necessary to open the portals between dimensions. These gods … they did not come from heaven. These writings were often found near the sites of the sacrificial ritual. The bones of the sacrificed were found in some cases. Crushed. Splintered as if their bodies

had been wrapped in great cords and squeezed until their skeletons shattered. Ripped apart as if by great jaws."

We finally entered a room with red walls that held none of the pages that were found throughout the house. These walls were bare. The hardwood floor and the ceiling were both a shiny black. At the other end of the narrow, rectangular room, between two pillars, stood a pedestal on which rested an onyx-black carving. It was old and pitted, but it had been restored to a glowing brilliance. It was a carving of a tentacled, winged creature that made no logical sense.

"My father's cult is not only still active, it is in control," he went on. "Its members are the richest, most powerful people in the world. They own virtually everything. They control governments. *They* choose presidents, not voters. They have been in control for some time and have been working hard to destroy our moral, financial, and political foundations. Now that they have succeeded in doing that, for the most part, they are ready to come forward, to bring their religion into the light and force it upon everyone. There is a reason for the inequality in this country, Rick, in this world. The underclasses are being stripped of rights, possessions, finances. And soon that cult will take control openly and begin a new system of government and religion. Their religion. And from the underclasses, from those marginalized, isolated groups, they will take the sacrifices to their gods. Unless I stop them."

"I don't understand. Stop them how?"

He nodded toward the carving. "By summoning the gods of this religion."

"And these gods will stop them?"

He smiled. "These gods … will stop everything. You may have thought I was exaggerating when I told you that I do not like people and prefer not to clutter my life with them, but I was not. From my sadistic father to my cruel private school teachers to the man who shot my wife and daughter, and everyone in between and beyond … all of them. I despise them. They're a cancer on the earth. It's my own misfortune to be one of them. So I am going to open a portal and free the earth of its abusers and end the disease that is humankind by handing it to these gods, these interdimensional beings that know nothing of hypocrisy or deceit, that make no claims to be anything but what they are. And your store, Rick, is built on that portal.

That's why I've been quietly performing rituals in that booth. Preparing the way. And soon they will come through."

He was, of course, batshit crazy. Harmless enough, or so I thought, but barking mad. I felt a twinge of sadness for him. He'd mentioned his father and the loss of his wife and daughter only in passing, but I knew he had been traumatized and scarred by those and probably more events. The damage had been significant and long-lasting.

"I'm curious, Zach. Why are you telling *me* all this?"

He smiled again. "Because I know you won't believe me. Right now, you're thinking that I'm insane, aren't you? I don't mind, really. I knew you would, and frankly, I don't blame you. If I weren't me, I would think I was insane, too." He winked.

"You … told me all this … *knowing* I wouldn't believe you?"

"Exactly. But we had to chat first so I could make sure. These days, so many people are losing their minds. Half of the people out there probably *would* believe me, and it would be nothing but trouble. After it happens, though, you will know it was all true. It won't happen all at once. It'll come in waves. So if you survive the initial penetration, you'll have time to tell others. That's all I ask of you. When it happens, tell people why. And who did it." Then he laughed. "I felt an overwhelming need to tell *someone* about it before I carried it out. I hope you don't mind that I chose you, Rick."

"Before you carry out—what?"

"I am going to open that portal in your store and let those old interdimensional gods come through, and I'm going to do it before my father's cult can enslave the world. I am going to leave them nothing to enslave. Before long, the entire human race will be either god food … or shrieking lunatics on their way to it. Would you like some cookies?"

My crazy-radar must have been down, or something. I'm usually able to spot them pretty quickly, but Zach had me fooled. I knew he was odd, but until that moment, I'd had no idea that he and reality had agreed to go their separate ways and have nothing more to do with each other.

I left him among his strange runes and hieroglyphs and walked home to my dingy closet of an apartment and drank myself to sleep.

I didn't see Zach again for almost a week. Then he came in on a busy Friday night. That terrible, rainy night. The store was crowded with men browsing the videos, magazines, and toys, and there was a line waiting for

booths in the back. He wore his usual duffle coat, hood up, but looked more stooped and somehow heavier and thicker than normal. His face looked dirty, as if covered by streaks of ash. He looked directly at me, smiled, then walked rapidly to the register. I figured he was going to buy some tokens, and I decided to sell them to him with the usual small talk and not behave as if I knew him to be a lunatic.

But he didn't want tokens. And his face wasn't streaked with ash.

He had drawn the weird hieroglyphics on his skin in some kind of dark green ink or paint. They covered his face.

He smiled. It was the biggest, warmest smile I'd seen on his face. And the last.

"Remember, Rick," he said. "I'm depending on you to spread the word about my work."

As he turned away from me, he pulled out of his coat an enormous gun. I don't know guns, so I couldn't tell you what kind of rifle it was, only that it was *big*. A big, black killing machine that he raised and began to fire.

It wasn't a very big store, and in the small, crowded space the gunshots sounded like bombs going off. The first man was shot in the back as he inspected a package containing a vibrating cock ring. The second shot removed most of the head from a man making his way through the discount DVDs. There was only one exit, and everyone headed for it at once as Zach calmly picked them off in the chaos, careful not to aim the gun in my direction.

I dropped behind the counter and pulled the phone with me. I tried not to hear the gunshots and the men screaming as they died while I punched 911, then plugged a finger into my other ear. I started talking before the female operator finished her opening. "Shooting at Millennium Adult Books off of Third Street!" I had to shout to be heard above the gunfire. I babbled the street number a few times, then said, "It's happening now, right now, a man with a rifle."

"We have units on the way sir, and at least … is nearby, so they … be there momentarily."

The gunshots sounded different, more muffled now. I suspected Zach had gone into the back room where the men in the booths and those who had been waiting would be trapped.

The smell of cordite burned my nose enough to make my eyes water. But there was another smell beneath it, a darker smell. Like a fistful of dirty

pennies. I dropped the phone, got to my knees, and slowly raised my head above the counter.

Sprawled bodies covered the floor and there seemed to be blood on everything. The glass door was slowly swinging closed after being pulled open by some lucky guy who'd gotten out in the nick of time. And now, there it was. The door. With nothing in the way but some dead and wounded men on the floor. And the shooting had moved to the back. Now was the time for me to get the hell out of there.

But my legs would not move and my insides had turned to water.

The shooting continued in the back, but it had slowed down.

Then it stopped.

He's going to come back in here looking for me because he saved me for last and now any second he's going to come through that curtain with the gun raised and he's going to—

A ululating wail rose from the back, mournful at first, then more aggressive, finally breaking into some kind of guttural language. I imagined Zach standing just outside or perhaps inside the third booth on the left, his chosen booth, where the vibrations were perfect, or something, I don't know, chanting in some long-dead language with those cryptic symbols on his face, surrounded by the men he'd killed. There was still time to get out.

I gripped the edge of the counter and pulled myself upright. My legs wobbled, but I forced them to work and staggered out from behind the register. I carefully stepped over the first dead body and was lifting my foot to step over the next when everything trembled. The whole building shook and the floor rippled beneath my feet.

I stood among the bodies and stared at the door, frozen by my own fear as the walls began to quiver and DVDs and magazines and books and dildos and furry handcuffs began to drop from their hooks and fall to the floor.

The floor exploded only a few feet from me and I was thrown backward. I landed on my ass on a cushion of bodies as rubble rained down on me, and I found myself staring up through the mist of plaster dust at the scabrous pillar that was plunging out of the floor. It rose nearly to the ceiling, a trunk of muscular flesh the color of a bruise, then turned downward and curved around. At the end of it, something opened like a blossoming flower. A circular row of writhing tentacles surrounded a dark, wet maw of glistening purple tissue that held a mass of needle-like fangs. It fell, then, like a big

tree, its gaping, tentacled mouth landing with a wet thud on the corpses that covered the floor. Then the mouth closed and began to chew.

The last thing I remember is the sound of the thing eating.

- - -

The memory feels like a nightmare I had, not an actual experience. I prefer to believe it was.

When I open my eyes again, a freckled, middle-aged man in a white coat is standing beside my bed reading my chart.

"Hello, Richard," he says. "I'm Dr. Lattimer."

"Rick," I say, my voice weak and hoarse.

"Rick, you're lucky to be alive. You were very nearly swallowed by a sinkhole."

"A … a sink … hole?"

"I'm afraid so. As far as we know, you were the only one to get out. The building you were in is gone. You have two fractures in your left arm, one in your right leg, and a lot of cuts and contusions."

Dr. Lattimer glances over his shoulder as whispered voices over by the window grow louder. He turns to me again and opens his mouth to speak, but one of the two nurses shouts, "Oh, my *god*!"

The doctor spins around to face the nurses and says, "What's wrong?"

"Come here, come here!" the blonde nurse hisses as she beckons him with a waggling hand.

As the doctor approaches, one of the other nurses points out the window and says, "Those things coming up out of the ground—"

"They look like huge snakes!" the third nurse says as the blonde added, "Or tentacles."

I watch their backs as they stand gazing out the window. I listen to their gasps, and at one point, the blonde lets out an abrupt shriek.

"There's another one," Dr. Lattimer says, his voice little more than a whimper.

"And one over there," a nurse whispered. "Oh, my god, it came up right through the train station!"

"We've got to do something," Dr. Lattimer says, backing away from the window. "Jesus Christ, they're everywhere!"

He rushes out of the room, apparently forgetting about me.

When I close my eyes, I see Zach's painted face … and that horrible thing that came up out of the floor. I remember something he said to me:

They'll come in waves. So if you survive the initial penetration, you'll have time to tell others. That's all I ask of you. When it happens, tell people why. And who did it.

And it's happening. It is really happening.

– For Rhonda Blackmon Walton

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

The Editor

S. T. Joshi is the author of *The Weird Tale* (1990), *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (1990), and *Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction* (2012). He has prepared corrected editions of H. P. Lovecraft's work for Arkham House and annotated editions of Lovecraft's stories for Penguin Classics. He has also prepared editions of Lovecraft's collected essays and poetry. His exhaustive biography, *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life* (1996), was expanded as *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (2010). He is the editor of the anthologies *American Supernatural Tales* (Penguin, 2007), *Black Wings I–II–III* (PS Publishing, 2010, 2012, 2013), *A Mountain Walked: Great Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (Centipede Press, 2014), *The Madness of Cthulhu* (Titan Books, 2014–15), and *Searchers After Horror: New Tales of the Weird and Fantastic* (Fedogan & Bremer, 2014). He is the editor of the *Lovecraft Annual* (Hippocampus Press), *the Weird Fiction Review* (Centipede Press), and the *American Rationalist* (Center for Inquiry). His Lovecraftian novel *The Assaults of Chaos* appeared in 2013. He is a winner of the World Fantasy Award, the Bram Stoker Award, the International Horror Guild Award, and the Distinguished Scholarship Award from the International Association of the Fantastic in the Arts.

The Contributors

The Oxford Companion to English Literature describes **Ramsey Campbell** as "Britain's most respected living horror writer." He has ben given more awards than any other writer in the field, including the Grand Master Award of the World Horror Convention, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Horror Writers Association, and the Living Legend Award of the International Horror Guild.

Ray Garton is a prolific writer of horror novels and short stories. Among his novels are *Live Girls* (1987), *Crucifax Autumn* (1988), *Lot Lizards* (1990), *Zombie Love* (2003), and *Serpent Girl* (2008). His short stories have

been gathered in *Pieces of Hate* (1995), *Slivers of Bone* (2008), and other volumes. He has also published several novelizations of films and television shows. In 2006 he received the World Horror Convention Grand Master Award.

Caitlín R. Kiernan is the author of nine novels, including, most recently, *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir*. Her copious short fiction has been collected in several volumes, including *Tales of Pain and Wonder*; *To Charles Fort, with Love*; *Alabaster*; *The Ammonite Violin and Others*; *A Is for Alien*; and *Confessions of a Five-Chambered Heart*. She is a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, a winner of the Bram Stoker Award, and a three-time nominee for the Shirley Jackson Award, and has also been honored by the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. She lives in Providence, R.I.

Thomas Ligotti is a contemporary American horror author and reclusive literary cult figure. His writings are unique in style, have been noted as major continuations of several literary genres, most prominently Lovecraftian horror, and have overall been described as works of "philosophical horror," often written as philosophical novels with a "darker" undertone that is similar to Gothic fiction. Ligotti started his publishing career in the early 1980s with a number of short stories published in various American small-press magazines.

Brian McNaughton (1935–2004) was the author of numerous tales and novels that mingled sex and supernatural horror, including *Gemini Rising* (1977; revised version published as *Satan's Love Child*, 2000), *Downward to Darkness* (1978; revised version published as *Satan's Mistress*, 2000), and *Worse Things Waiting* (1979; revised version published as *Satan's Seductress*, 2000). With *The Throne of Bones* (1997) McNaughton wrote a whole series of stories set in H. P. Lovecraft's Dreamland, with ghouls as the central characters. The book won the World Fantasy Award.

Edith Miniter (1869–1934) was a leading figure in the amateur journalism movement in the early decades of the 20th century. She issued several amateur journals, including the *Muffin Man* and *Aftermath*. She published a novel, *Our Natupski Neighbors* (Henry Holt, 1916), about Polish immigrants in Massachusetts; many of her short stories were published in

leading magazines. She struck up an acquaintance with H. P. Lovecraft in the early 1920s and received him in her house in Wilbraham, MA in 1928, where Lovecraft derived some of the inspiration for "The Dunwich Horror" (1928). After her death, Lovecraft wrote a poignant memoir, "Mrs. Miniter —Estimates and Recollections" (1934).

W. H. Pugmire is a writer of horror fiction based in Seattle. Strongly influenced by the works of H. P. Lovecraft, many of Pugmire's stories directly reference Lovecraftian elements. Pugmire's major original contribution to the Cthulhu Mythos is the Sesqua Valley, a fictional location in the Pacific Northwest of the United States that serves as the primary locale for much of his fiction. Pugmire is a self-proclaimed eccentric recluse, "the Queen of Eldritch Horror," as well as a self-identified "punk rock queen and street transvestite."

Mark Samuels is the author of four short story collections, *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press, 2003), *Black Altars* (Rainfall Books, 2003), *Glyphotech and Other Macabre Processes* (PS Publishing, 2008), and *The Man Who Collected Machen* (Ex Occidente, 2010; rpt. Chomu Press, 2011), as well as the short novel *The Face of Twilight* (PS Publishing, 2006). His work has appeared multiple times in Year's Best Horror anthologies.

Clark Ashton Smith (1893–1961) initially gained celebrity for such poetry volumes as *The Star-Treader and Other Poems* (1912) and *Odes and Sonnets* (1918). In the 1930s he began writing weird, fantasy, and science fiction stories for such pulp magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Wonder Stories*. These tales were collected in several volumes by *Arkham House* and have now been issued in definitive texts as *Collected Fantasies* (Night Shade Books, 2006–10; 5 vols.). He began writing to H. P. Lovecraft in 1922, and his correspondence with him has been published as *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill* (Hippocampus Press, 2017).

Jonathan Thomas was born in Providence, R.I., raised in a haunted house, and was a student of Lovecraft scholar Barton St. Armand. His initial sales were to b&w comics *Eerie* and *Vampirella*. He has been employed as an artist's model, postal clerk, concert promoter, library assistant, copyeditor, and percussionist. Since 1991 he has been married to artist and country

singer Angel Dean. Books include *Stories from the Big Black House* (Radio Void, 1992), *Midnight Call* and *Tempting Providence* (Hippocampus Press, 2008 and 2010), and *The Color over Occam* (Arcane Wisdom, 2011). Recent work has appeared in *Black Wings I–IV*, *Nameless*, *PS*, and *Studies in the Fantastic*.

C. Hall Thompson published four stories in *Weird Tales*, including two striking tales of the Cthulhu Mythos, "Spawn of the Green Abyss" (November 1946) and "The Will of Claude Asher" (July 1947). His other tales in the magazine were "The Pale Criminal" (September 1947) and "Clay" (May 1948). Later in his career, Thompson published several Western novels.

Donald Wandrei (1908–1987) was a prolific contributor to such pulp magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories*. His collected weird tales were published as *Don't Dream* (Fedogan & Bremer, 1997), and his collected science fiction tales as *Colossus* (Fedogan & Bremer, 1989). His two novels, *Dead Titans, Waken!* (the early version of *The Web of Easter Island*) and *Invisible Sun*, were issued by Centipede Press in 2011. He was a central figure in the Lovecraft circle, and his correspondence with Lovecraft has been published as *Mysteries of Time and Spirit* (Night Shade Books, 2002).

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